Geeks & Geezers

How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders

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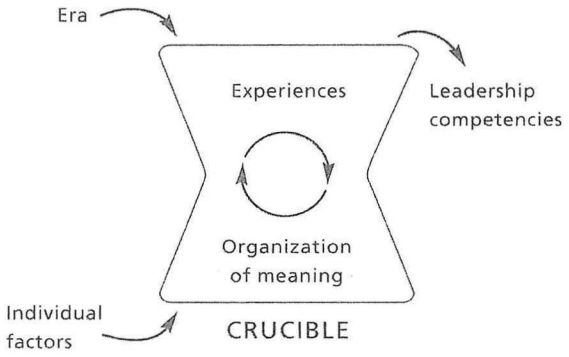
2002
HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS
Boston, Massachusetts

This is the first cohort to grow up visual, virtual, and digital, and we ignore it at our peril.

A New Model of Leadership

As we explain in the preface, this book started out as a study of both young and old leaders and how era influences leadership, but it evolved into something more. As a result of our research for the book, we have developed a theory that describes, we believe for the first time, how leaders come to be. We believe that we have identified the process that allows an individual to undergo testing and to emerge, not just stronger, but equipped with the tools he or she needs both to lead and to learn. It is a model that explains how individuals make meaning out of often difficult events—we call them *crucibles*—and how that process of "meaning-making" both galvanizes individuals and gives them their distinctive voice. That model (shown in figure 1-1) describes a powerful chain reaction of change and growth.

Figure 1-1 Our Leadership Development Model



Much of this book is devoted to explicating that model and showing how it is reflected in the development of leaders of all ages. The process we will explore is one that allowed Nelson Mandela not simply to survive, but to emerge from twenty-seven years in a South African prison as the most powerful moral leader since Gandhi. It is the process that forged a Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Golda Meir, and a Martin Luther King, Jr. It is the process that led one of our geezers, Sidney Rittenberg, to pioneer business ties between the United States and China after spending sixteen years in Chinese prisons during the 1940s and 1950s, and that produced gifted geeks like educational activist Wendy Kopp and serial entrepreneur Michael Klein. Our model explains how leaders develop, in whatever era, and predicts who is likely to become and remain a leader. In the pages that follow, you'll discover why some people are able to lead for a lifetime, while others never seem able to unleash remarkable gifts. You'll see why *learning* to learn is key to becoming a leader. And you'll discover why the factors that produce leaders are the same ones that predict something far more important than professional success: They are the very factors that allow us to live happy, meaningful lives.

Defining Our Terms

When we first began talking about leadership as a lifetime process, we used polite, even euphemistic, terms to describe the two groups that most interested us—youthful leaders who discovered their abilities early and older ones who were able to create leadership roles for themselves decade after decade. (For a complete list of those we studied, see table 1-1 and the brief biographies in appendix A.) At first, we spoke of "younger leaders and mature leaders," of "Greatest Generation leaders and those from Generation X." But as our conversations became more animated and intense, we dropped the polite terms and opted for a more convenient, if less flattering, shorthand. We began referring to our two groups as *geeks* and *geezers*.

Table 1-1 Geezers and Geeks Interviewed in the Project

Geezers		
Warren G. Bennis	Edwin Guthman	Richard Riordan
John Brademas	Sidney Harman	Sidney Rittenberg
Jack Coleman	Frances Hesselbein	Muriel Siebert
Robert L. Crandall	Dee Hock	Paolo Soleri
Father Robert F. Drinan	Nathaniel R. Jones	Walter Sondheim, Jr.
Robert Galvin	Arthur Levitt, Jr.	Mike Wallace
John Gardner	Elizabeth McCormack	John Wooden
Frank Gehry	Bill Porter	
Don Gevirtz	Ned Regan	

Geeks		
Elizabeth Altman	Sky Dayton	Brian Morris
Lorig Charkoudian	Harlan Hugh	Lingyun Shao
Steve Chen	Elizabeth Kao	Young Shin
Tara Church	Geoffrey Keighley	Bridget Smith
Ian Clarke	Michael Klein	Brian Sullivan
Dan Cunningham	Wendy Kopp	Jeff Wilke

Although these terms may seem self-explanatory, let us be precise about them. The geeks whose leadership fascinated us are young (35 and under); most of them are involved in the now troubled but still vital New Economy. In deciding upon our geeks, we looked for outstanding achievement at a notably early age, combined with a thoughtful ability to articulate their experiences, observations, and views. We consciously sought out men and women who had led or even built organizations—having a good idea or a "killer app" alone would not qualify someone for inclusion if they did not also prove themselves capable of leading people.

The geeks in our study are a varied lot. They are the heads of dot-coms and other information-based organizations, including Sky Dayton, founder of Earthlink and Boingo Wireless; chocolatier Dan Cunningham; and digital iconoclast Ian Clarke, founder of FreeNet. They are accomplished executives in more conventional businesses, like Elizabeth Kao at Ford Motor Company and Elizabeth Altman at Motorola. A few started organizations in order to serve causes dear to them, such as Tara Church, who was an 8-year-old Brownie when she founded the environmental group Tree Musketeers, and Lorig Charkoudian, who founded Baltimore Community Mediation, which helps community members resolve disputes nonviolently. Whether or not they work in the technology sector, they are geeks in the sense of "computer geeks"—young people who have been working with digital technology for as long as they can remember. Theirs is the first cohort to have had computers in elementary school. People with 1s and 0s in their blood, they interact with machines as easily as with other human beings—more easily, critics say.

The leaders we termed *geezers* are the grandparents of our geeks. That's literally true in the case of Bob Galvin, vice chairman of Motorola, who is the grandfather of Brian Sullivan, CEO of Rolling Oaks Enterprises. These geezer men and women (far more of the former than the latter, sad to say) are widely admired for their wisdom and skill. Some are retired, but most continue to lead major corporations and other successful organizations. Reduced to what National Public Radio's David Brancaccio calls "the numbers," our geezers are all 70 and over. When selecting geezers, we were especially interested in people who may have changed arenas but continue to be involved in important work and engaged with the world. The geezers who fascinate us are people like Mel Brooks, who, at 75, launched a new career for himself as a songwriter and won twelve Tonys—the all-time record—for the Broadway show he helped create from his manic film classic *The Producers*. You need only to have seen Brooks giddily accept Tony after Tony during the 2001 telecast of the theatrical awards show to realize that creativity and vitality are functions of factors other than age. Indeed, his strategy for dealing with his age is to ignore it: "I don't look in the mirror and I don't look in the calendar," he has said. Thus, we were intrigued by leaders like Frank

Gehry, designer of the most talked-about building of recent times—the gleaming, undulating Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. He turned 70 in 2000 and yet continues to play the ice hockey he has loved since he was a boy in Toronto. Other geezers include Visa International founder Dee Hock, former Securities and Exchange Commission head Arthur Levitt, Jr., former Los Angeles mayor Richard Riordan (who once played ice hockey against Gehry), Wall Street pioneer Muriel Siebert, CBS News editor and correspondent Mike Wallace, and UCLA basketball coach John Wooden.

Recording Leadership in Images and Stories

We wanted our leaders to share their experiences because we know the power of stories and their ability to convey complex, nuanced information. We wanted the leaders to tell us, in their own words, the aspirations, drives, and events that shaped them, the lessons they learned, and the insights they gained. At the same time, we wanted to collect data systematically so we could see what patterns emerged when that data was analyzed. In order to collect information that could be collated and compared, we asked each person the same set of questions, but we also gave them the opportunity to make any observations they deemed relevant. We decided to videotape the interviews whenever possible, because we knew taping would preserve a wealth of information that no transcript could capture, from body language to subtle shifts in emphasis and energy. Watching the tapes later did indeed remind us of the catch in a voice that marked some unforgettable event, the brio with which they talked about their work, the visible anguish that some showed as they remembered instances of tragedy and loss, the tenderness with which mentors were recalled. We reasoned that this mixed-media approach would give us the best of both worlds—empirical data that would allow us to draw valid conclusions and

an invaluable archive of images and stories of leadership that would long linger in the reader's, and the viewer's, mind.[2]

After several refinements and considerable tweaking, the questionnaire we administered asked such key questions as: What were the defining moments in your life? How did you get from here to there? How do you define success? How did you define it at 30? What makes you happy? What role has failure played in your life?

Remember that the questionnaire (appendix B) was only a starting point, albeit a critical one. Some of the most telling information emerged late in these interviews of two hours or more, after the subjects, assuming the interviews were essentially over, had forgotten the video camera and relaxed.

The resulting 43 interviews with leaders ranging in age from 21 to 93 are powerful in their insight and candor. As we asked our subjects to think deeply about their lives, we realized that we were really writing collaborative autobiographies. We were asking them to reveal how they saw themselves, to share the lives they had both lived in reality and constructed in their own minds. In a sense, we were asking them to tell us who *they* believed themselves to be. Insights from the interviews will form the core of the next two chapters. Chapter 2 elaborates our arguments about the importance of era and values in shaping leaders while focusing on the formative period for our geezers, 1945–1954. We turn to the geeks in chapter 3 and learn what leadership, success, and fulfillment look like to those who came of age in the years 1991–2000.

Although Bennis and Biederman have proclaimed the death of the Great Man (and Woman) in *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration* and elsewhere, this project literally focused the camera on the person at the top and gave only fleeting acknowledgment to the network of people who make any complex organization or enterprise a success.[3] We made a deliberate decision to emphasize the leader rather than his or her inevitable partner, the group, because we had so much that is new and important to say about leaders. However, it is still true that "None of us is as smart as all of us" and that one is usually too small a

say how long the new reality will last but, in the United States and much of Europe, there is renewed faith in the relevance of heroism and a new longing for leaders of heroic stature. Emblematic of the change: In the same post-attack issue that chronicled the many loves of Madonna, *People* magazine ran a profile of Winston Churchill, whose eloquent ability to engage a nation through shared meaning had become relevant once again.

Commonalities as Well as Differences

Even as we catalogued the era-based differences between generations, we were struck by the even more intriguing similarities. Both generations were able to thrive in complex, ambiguous situations (*messiness,* we called it), sometimes actually seeking out challenging disorder. But voluntary complexity is much easier to bear than the kind that comes roaring out of nowhere. Our geeks, who came of age during an era of relentlessly accelerating change, now face new tests of just how nimble and unflappable they are, given the lingering downturn in the information economy. When our geezers were younger, they tended to seek out fluid, unpredictable situations only after they had experienced the professional and economic stability so highly prized after the Depression and World War II. Having enjoyed the predictable but genuine pleasures of conventional success, many of our geezers became serial risk-takers, distinguishable from our entrepreneurial geeks only by the greater length of the elders' resumes.

There were other important commonalities as well. Whatever his or her generation, each of our leaders was the author, and critic, of his or her own life. In the course of our interviews, it became clear that each person had crafted a resonant story out of the important events and relationships in his or her life. These stories were rarely self-adulatory, but each was a variant on the hero's journey, a tale in which the individual was tested—sometimes sorely—and ultimately triumphed. The trophy was typically a life-changing discovery about the world, the self, or both.

To a person, our leaders felt that the insights they had won justified whatever hardships they had endured. In every case, they learned and they grew. Their stories explained, amused, engaged, and often enrolled others in the narrator's vision. Whatever course their lives had taken, they felt that they had been active participants in, if not captains of, their fate. Many expressed sadness at personal losses, but none expressed regrets.

From the first, our goal was to discover how leadership develops and how it is sustained. Again and again, we saw the same pattern in our geezers—individuals who remained effective leaders even as the world changed around them. Indeed, they often seemed to become *more* effective leaders as a result of change. Existing theories of leadership based on personality traits and situational explanations simply couldn't account for the rich data in front of us. They didn't adequately explain the dynamic process that we saw again and again, in which era, individual factors, and certain key competencies—adaptive capacity, above all, but also the ability to engage others through shared meaning, voice, and integrity—coalesced around a critical experience or event to transform the individual. Why, we asked ourselves, are some people able to extract wisdom from experience while others become its victims? To answer that question, we had to propose a new theory of how leaders are made. That theory both describes and predicts who is likely to become and remain a leader, and describes the parallel process whereby individuals become lifetime learners.

We discovered the heart of that new theory as we listened to leader after leader tell us their "defining moment" stories. Each of these autobiographical tales had at its core a crucible, as we described in chapter 4. *Crucible* was the portmanteau term we needed, elastic enough to include the wide range of transformational events that our leaders experienced, from Tara Church's revelation about paper plates to Muriel Siebert's battle against the Wall Street boys club. Many of our leaders had been changed in one crucible after another. But in every case, the experience was a test and a decision point, where existing values were examined

and strengthened or replaced, where alternative identities were considered and sometimes chosen, where judgment and other abilities were honed. Every crucible is an incubator for new insights, ideas, and conceptions of one's self. Often the transformational event is a traumatic one, as it routinely is in war, and it sometimes involves the daunting realization that the individual has power over other people's lives. This discovery is sobering, thrilling, and empowering, all at once. Whatever the crucible experience—going into battle, immersion in another culture, being mentored, overcoming fears—the individual created a narrative around it, a story of how he or she was challenged, met that challenge, and became a new and better self. That story is often so convincing that it inspires others to follow the narrator.

Remarkably, as we reread our growing collection of autobiographical stories, we discovered that virtually every one was about the education of the narrator. Although each of our leaders had a distinctive way of saying it, each could have described his or her life as Solon did almost 3,000 years ago when he said of himself: "Each day he grew older and learned something new." Learning how to learn may be the single greatest gift that our leaders took away from their crucibles, the all-in-one tool that they could depend on in all their subsequent dealings with other people and the world. When their having learned how to learn was combined with creativity, our leaders were unstoppable.

In the course of our interviews, we were repeatedly struck by how engaging our subjects were. This was a quality independent of their fields of endeavor and their specific achievements. Almost all were people that you wanted to spend time with. Had you met them at a party, you would have been reluctant to move on. This quality existed independently of intelligence and beauty—although many of our leaders had both—and it had nothing to do with their age. There was something else about virtually all of them that made us want to linger and hear more of what they had to say. We realized that our leaders all enrolled others in their enthusiasms. They had an aura about them, an energy.[2] Youthfulness doesn't quite describe it. We saw the signs again and again. Eyebrows raised in

wonder and surprise. An openness to experience. An unselfconscious candor. A mischievous smile and contagious laugh. Wit. Resilience. Curiosity. Tirelessness. An almost palpable hunger for experience and an incapacity for bored detachment. These are the winning attributes of a brilliant child, and we found them embodied in reflective, intelligent, sociable adults. We began referring to this all-important quality—one that recruits others and lubricates social interactions—as *neoteny*. Often confused with charisma, neoteny, we came to see, was the almost magical quality that draws people to our older, lifetime leaders, helping to insure that they have a constituency and a stage.

Playing Any Song

As we spent more and more time trying to isolate the qualities and conditions that allow some to lead for a lifetime, we were reminded of a story—an autobiographical story not unlike the anecdotes we plumbed our subjects for. After years of procrastination, one of us asked a piano teacher if it would be possible to learn to play a few songs without going to the trouble of weekly lessons and learning to read sheet music. The teacher, a shrewd judge of character, asked why we wanted to learn "a few songs." To fulfill a fantasy, she was told, to produce a beautiful, pleasing sound. Frowning, she replied that, yes, one could learn a few songs. But after a tantalizing pause, she brightened and asked, "How would you like to play *any* song?"

Somewhere along the line, our geezers (and some of our geeks) learned how to play any of the songs required of a leader—not just how to manage a crisis, not just how to recruit, not just how to articulate the vision of the organization, but all these and more. Interestingly, when we asked our geeks and geezers to tell us their theories of leadership, most were not especially eloquent. But when we asked them to tell us how they handled some specific situation requiring their leadership, they were wonderfully adept at describing the challenge, the context, their tactics, what was at