

# Leadership in Complicated Times

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We live in a time of great and complex challenges, as you know. I'd like to share a few words this morning about the kind of leadership I believe it will take to navigate these challenges in the years ahead.

A hundred years ago United States President Woodrow Wilson made an astonishing prediction when he said, "There will come a time when America will be surprised to find herself grown old, crowded, and perplexed; when she will be obliged to pull herself together, curb her excesses, restrict her vagaries, and trust her best, not her average citizens."

We have arrived, Mr. Wilson, and who knew you were a prophet as well as a President?

But who exactly are our "best citizens?" I hope you don't mean citizens who are highly educated, who are wealthy, white, privileged, and male, like yourself. Besides, doesn't democracy depend fundamentally on the instincts and actions of average, ordinary citizens?

Seventy years later Robert Greenleaf, another prophet, wrote a book called *The Servant as Leader*. This was 1968, another time of great complexity in our nation. The Cold War was alive, the Vietnam War was raging, American college students were dying on American soil, inner cities were in flames, and some of our finest leaders were assassinated in Dallas and Memphis and Chicago.

Greenleaf looked out at this upheaval and asked a provocative question, a question still eminently relevant: Who is to blame? Who is standing the way of a better society? Who is the enemy?

He reflected: Is it the protestors? The politicians? The Republicans or Democrats? Is it corporations, or corrupt corporate leaders? Is it racial extremists?

Fundamentalists? The military? Black people? White people? Poor people? Men? It is evil, apathy, ignorance, the system?

Greenleaf's answer changed the course of my life. He argued that if you got rid of all the offending people, all the bad people, the dumb people, the wrong people, the powerful or the poor people, they would all be back in a generation or two. This is Earth. We are human beings—a wildly imperfect species, talented at getting into all sorts of trouble. No, the enemy, said Greenleaf, are the strong, natural leaders, men and women capable of incredible contributions who could lead us towards a better world but do not. We then are the enemy if we do not choose the high and hard road that redeems humankind. And decent man though I was, I knew I would be the enemy if I did not leave my farm in the mountains of Kentucky and choose that road myself.

I submit, Mr. Wilson, that these are our best citizens. Luckily they are everywhere in our society. They are black and white, they are red, brown, and yellow. They are gay, and they are lesbian. They are rural and urban. They are Republican, and they are Democrat. They come from poverty as well as privilege. They may not have had the benefit of a great education. But they are far from average.

I'm speaking to citizens like these this morning. You are here at Brushy Fork to become even more effective in your commitment to the mountains, and to moun-

tain people. You'll appreciate my preferred definition of leadership, from friend Robert Burkhardt, who said "Leadership is the inability to sit back and watch the world go to hell."

For twenty years I've been thinking about what it means to lead well in complex times. Here are four key elements that I believe characterize the kind of leadership we will need in the coming decades.

### Remember the Dream

We spend so much of our time solving problems, fighting fires, and struggling with all the things that are wrong in our world that we rarely focus on the dream of what our society and our communities could be. In spite of our great divergences, we do share a common dream. A dream that the skies are clear, the streets are safe, the rivers are clean, that our democracy is working, that kids get a strong start in life, that our elderly are honored and cared for. We share the dream of global peace, of no more war. I personally, after years working in nearly every sector of society, have never met a single person who did not share this dream.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in his famous *I Have a Dream* speech, painted an incredibly compelling picture of an America where the sons of slaves and the sons of slave owners broke bread together. JFK did the same when he envisioned a man on the moon by the end of the decade back in 1960. Stephen Covey would say that good leaders should "begin with the end in mind".

I know this sounds "nice," perhaps rather soft. But there's a lot of research suggesting that nothing motivates people more than the vision of a positive future—something to aim for—"A BHAG or Big Hairy Audacious Goal" to quote Jim Collins. This is true nationally, organizationally and personally.

It is also critical to accentuate what is working and not just what needs fixing.

The ancient Chinese put it well when they said "the best way to fight evil is to make energetic progress in the good". We are beginning to regard our poorer communities, for instance, as not just as a collection of great problems but of great assets, great resilience. Two words from Vaughn Grisham's wonderful talk last night: Tupelo, Mississippi. Helen Keller was right when she said that "no pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit".

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### Cross All Kinds of Boundaries

John Gardner, one of our greatest Americans, advisor to seven US presidents, founder of Common Cause, champion of democracy and of citizen engagement, believed that our nation is in grave danger unless more of us become "boundary crossers." What boundaries did he mean? Every kind of boundary. The sectoral boundaries—business, government, nonprofits, education, health-care, and philanthropy. Of course, racial, ethnic, class, gender, religious, political, rural, urban, age and ability boundaries. Boundaries both inside and outside our organizations.

To be a boundary crosser means not only to include the un-included in decisions that affect their lives. We've learned the importance of that. It also means to transcend the adversarialism that makes it so easy to

Cross boundaries.  
Transcend the adversarialism that makes it  
so easy to blame others  
rather than finding  
a common cause.

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blame others rather than making common cause for the common good. In my opinion, we don't have the luxury of the blame game anymore. The stakes are too high, the ship is taking on water, and it's an all-hands-on-deck time. Besides, you never know where you might find strong allies if you willing to cross boundaries and not pre-judge people who are different than yourself. Consider Abraham Lincoln's perspective: "I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends."

Keep your house in order. Learn the skills necessary to create smart, vital workplaces.

I've been crossing a few boundaries of my own, and one of the things I've learned in the years since I left Berea College is that people from all walks of life share the dream and want to make things better. I raised a few eyebrows consulting for BP in Alaska, becoming friends with the president of an oil company. I had most of my stereotypes of energy company execs blasted to smithereens during those two years. I used to hate oil companies and subscribed heartily to the notion that multinational corporations were definitely the enemy. I knew it was going to be an eye opening assignment when my first week on the job I followed BP's chief explorer through the grocery store check-out line. He wore Birkenstocks, and he and his wife had brought their cloth shopping bags from home so as not to use paper or plastic re-

sources unnecessarily. This is the guy who would have gone into the Arctic Refuge to site oil wells if it were opened. I learned that at BP folks don't dislike Greenpeace nearly as much as they dislike Exxon. Long before Kyoto, the well-educated and informed folks at BP believed global climate change was a reality. Who knew?

Boundary crossers learn to work well with people who are different than themselves. I love what Spelman College President Johnetta Cole says about this: "We are for difference. For allowing difference. For celebrating difference. Until difference doesn't make any more difference."

### Keep Your House in Order

Your house is your organization, your constituency, your group, whatever people you are called upon to lead and serve. As a professional management consultant, I have to tell you that the news from the organizational world is not so good. Healthy organizations are rare, toxic organizations are common, and people spend way too much of their time in miserable work environments. There is a discouraging lack of civility and effective dialogue in our institutions. The discourse is often so poor that, as one management thinker suggested, it is at about the level of arguments you used to have with your ten-year-old brother.

Corporate managers spend a whopping 42 percent of their time mediating workplace disputes. What a colossal waste of that manager's strategic intelligence! To complicate matters, visionary and entrepreneurial leaders are often terrible managers, draconian even. We tend to excuse this, but I think we cannot. You know Gandhi's famous quote that "we ourselves must be the change we want to see in the world." Our workplaces, our community meetings, our groups and organizations, must also be the change we want to see in the world.

Keeping your house in order means learning the skills necessary to create

smart, vital workplaces. It means professionalizing your management abilities, aligning means and ends, and taking 100 percent responsibility. It means scrupulous, sterling integrity. It means a lot of listening. It means intentionally designing environments that support not only the goals of the organization but the goals of those who give their lives to it.

Again, this may sound “nice” to you, but Jim Heskett, one of my colleagues at Harvard Business School, did a fascinating study showing that well managed organizational cultures enjoy 688 percent higher financial returns. When you create healthy, intelligent cultures where people can disagree without being disagreeable and work together effectively across all kinds of boundaries, you improve your bottom line. Whether your bottom line is financial, or building low-income housing, or feeding people or serving children. Tom Peters said a long time ago in his famous book *In Search of Excellence*, “the soft stuff is the hard stuff.”

### Keep Yourself in Order

A couple of my friends—both strong, smart community activists—have killed themselves in the last few years. Burn-out is common, even among fine, principled leaders. This isn’t exactly easy work, as you know. We have to keep ourselves in order, both to protect ourselves and to improve ourselves.

The Buddhists have a wonderful concept called “right livelihood.” Imagine two circles overlapping. That almond shape in the middle is the place where your inner and outer journeys meet, where your inner values are reflected in the work you do. And where the work you do enriches your spirit. This equation must work both ways or it’s not truly right livelihood.

Leading well in complicated times means taking “inner work” seriously, however you conceive of that work. Dee Hock, the founder of Visa and one of the

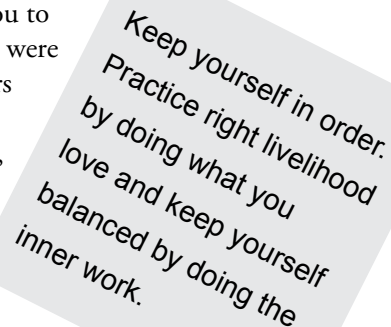
great corporate leaders of our era, says a wonderful thing about leadership: “Invest 40 percent of your time managing yourself, your ethics, your motivation, your character, your purpose, your abilities.” The more you work on yourself, the more effective you become in your work.

The inner work is whatever it takes to keep you balanced—sitting down with a cup of coffee to reflect on your day, going on a vacation, taking a walk, reading good books, talking to a good therapist. For some it’s prayer or meditation. No matter what it is, we need to do something to keep ourselves in that almond shape, that sweet spot of right livelihood—clear, kind and sane for the long haul.

This too seems unnecessarily nice, seems soft. But here’s an interesting study for you to consider: 1,500 people were tracked for twenty years when they graduated from college. Group A, eighty-three percent said, “I’ll go out and make money now and do what I love later.” Group

B, seventeen percent said, “To hell with that! I’m going to do what I love now, and figure out how to make money later.” At the end of the 20 years, 101 of the 1500 had become millionaires. All but one came from group B—the people who said “I’m going to do what I love now and figure out the money later.” Finding joy in your work—doing what you *love*—produces its own bottom line.

And so Mr. Wilson, our best citizens are those who remember the dream, who cross all kinds of boundaries, who keep both their houses and themselves in order.



Keep yourself in order.  
Practice right livelihood  
by doing what you  
love and keep yourself  
balanced by doing the  
inner work.

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Let me close with a few lines of a poem, which I dedicate to all of you, to Peter and the Brushy Fork staff and to John Stephenson, whose vision that created the Brushy Fork Institute seventeen years ago. The English Poet Steven Spender wrote:

I think continually of those who were truly great.  
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history  
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns  
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition  
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,  
Should tell of the spirit, clothed from head to foot in song...  
Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields  
See how these names are celebrated by the waving grass  
And by the streamers of white cloud  
And whispers of wind in listening sky.  
The names of those who in their lives fought for life  
Who wore at their hearts the fire's center.  
Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun,  
And left the vivid air signed with their honor.

May we too fight for life, and leave the vivid air signed with our honor. Thank you for your time today. All the best in your important work.

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We begin to turn the corner when we start to hope, when we believe something better can happen. Sometimes it only takes a small success: a park gets cleaned up or the windows in the downtown storefronts get replaced instead of being boarded over. Maybe it's just someone putting a stereo on the porch and cranking up the music while their neighbors clean up the street. Little things can make a big difference.

Two years ago I went to Siberia in Russia to work in a village of 300 people. Believe me, this is the middle of the middle of nowhere: 90 percent unemployment, high alcoholism, and worst of all no hope. I proposed that we start by doing something together, a small project we could all see. We spent an afternoon talking about it, and the next morning they said, "OK, we have an idea. Let's build a volleyball field." They came back after lunch with shovels and picks. We got out there and started digging. This is Siberia, of course, and the ground is mostly rock; most of what we did was moving rocks so you could actually stand out there. By the end of the day, we had a volleyball field. They were out there playing volleyball and half of the village was out there watch-

ing. That experience changed everything. For the rest of the week, they were ready to work together, ready to plan, ready to dream, ready to hope because they wanted a better life. In that one small step, they began to believe it was possible.

Who wants a better life? If you want a better life, build a better community. That takes leadership and strong organizations, which is why Brushy Fork created this Institute—so we can provide the resources to build strong organizations and community leadership in this region so we can build better communities. Who wants a better life?

We are going to create a little community right here over the next few days and everybody is going to be at the table. We want your ideas, your concerns, your input. We want to ask tough questions, and we want to seek new answers. When we say, "It's different here," we want to mean that it really *is* different and that the difference is *good*.

Let's build a better community; let's build it before the next storm strikes. Let's make a better life for everybody; it really can be different here. Who wants a better life? You want a better life? I know I do, I know you do too; that's why you're here. So, let's get to work.