

LEADING YOURSELF



PART I:

Most powerful is he who has himself in his own power.
- Lucius Annaeus Seneca

People buy into the leader before they buy into the vision.
- John C. Maxwell



ARE LEADERS BORN?

“He’s a natural leader.” Ever heard that? Some people seem to think that great leaders have to be born with the right genes. But I don’t think that’s the case.

Here’s a metaphor that you might find useful: compare leadership to athletics, like running. Very few people are great runners – Olympic quality, world class. Can everybody reach that level? No, obviously not.

A while ago, someone asked a champion athlete what the most important thing to do to become great. His response? “Choose your parents wisely.”

To an extent, I think that may also be true of leadership. The greatest leaders seem to have a certain gift to lead, to read people and situations, to inspire with vision, to engage on a personal level and win wholehearted commitment. They are people that others seem to just naturally want to follow. They are world class.

But that doesn’t mean other people can’t lead. There isn’t only one great runner out there; there are many.

And whether you are concerned about running or leading, genetics is something you can’t change anyway, so there is no use in worrying about it. We all have the abilities and talents we are born with. What we can change is what we do with the gifts we have. That’s the thing to focus on.

**TIP
#1**

Focus on what you can change, not on what you can’t change.



You can wish all you want to be three inches taller, but that's a waste of effort; not much you can do about it. Better to look at something that you can change. One example might how you spend time.

You can choose to watch TV or play video games all day, and if you are happy where you are, that might be fine. But if you are looking for change, for improvement, to have an impact on your world, it's going to take a little effort. And I think you are probably capable of it.

YOU ARE CAPABLE OF GREAT CHANGE

It doesn't happen overnight, either. Most worthwhile things take effort; you have to work at it. But if you consistently apply yourself over time, you will amaze yourself at the results. The thing is to set a goal, then take a reasonable, achievable step towards that goal every day. Over time, you will be amazed at what you can accomplish.

Here's a personal example. I'm not a great athlete, but I like to get in my exercise – it's good for being outside in the fresh air, helps my self-confidence, maintains my health, and keeps me balanced in life.

Over the last several years I had worked up to doing some long distance triathlons. I loved training and racing and was happy with the results, but in the process of training and racing, I had strained my Achilles tendon on my right leg – that long tough membrane that attaches the calf muscle to the heel – it's pretty important for running, as you might imagine. I had to stop running for a while. It was frustrating.

Nearly a year went by. In September of 2013 I was itching to race again and believed that I was mostly healed. So I started running again. One mile a day. Six days a week. At pretty much a shuffle pace. It seemed almost ridiculous – too easy, too short. Only six miles a week.

But I knew I had to ease into it, to grow gradually, to steadily increase a little bit at a time.

After a few weeks at one mile a day, I bumped it up to 1.5, then later 2. Winter came, the snow fell, but still I ran. Not always enthusiastically, but I made sure to get out the door every day. By spring I was up to four miles a day, 24 miles a week.

I started making every other day a longer run, building gradually to eight miles and doing a longer run on Saturdays up to 16, 18, 20 by the end of spring. I topped out at 42 miles a week (that's on top of a bunch of swimming and cycling).

I completed Ironman Texas in May with my second fastest marathon run time ever (the fastest one didn't involve a swim and bike warmup!). It felt great! It took eight months to go from zero miles to 26.2, but the payoff was wonderful.

On the long drive back to Pennsylvania, a thought popped into my head. I had a birthday coming up in November. Wouldn't it be kind of cool if I could run 50 miles in one day the month I turned 50 years old?

The more I thought about the idea, the more I liked it. I love a good challenge, but I had never run anything close to that distance. A marathon was tough enough; this was daunting.

How to prepare? I did what had worked well so far – I kept slowly adding distance and miles. Steadily, consistently, always putting in my time; mostly alone, out of the limelight.

Finally, on a cold November morning in 2014, I lined up with over 800 other characters at the JFK 50-Mile Trail Race in Maryland. The gun went off, and we took our first steps. It was 16 miles of hilly, rocky trail running, 26 miles of flat, winding canal pathway, and a final eight miles of rolling country roads. It took a while, a long while, and it wasn't easy, especially the last eight miles. Every section had its challenges. But I finished before the sun set, and dropped exhausted but happy onto the grass.

I had gone from zero miles to running 50 in one day in just a little over a year.

This isn't to try to impress you with an achievement. It's about trying to describe how incredible the human animal is, how adaptable, how resilient. We all have these qualities. I saw people out on that running trail that I would never have suspected to be long distance runners. I wouldn't have thought they could finish 10 miles, let alone 50. If we had met on the street, there would be no way to tell.

I don't mind telling you that some of those people who didn't look like great runners were passing me on those last eight miles of rolling countryside. Respect to them!

So you never know until you try. The real winners were every one of those people who woke up on that frosty morning last November, laced up their running shoes, and took a shot at it. They got out there, committed themselves to doing something, put in the time and the effort every day for weeks and months so that they would be ready when the test came.

Most of them finished, but whether they were first last, somewhere in the middle, or "only" made it to the 42 mile point, they were all winners for making the attempt.

TIP #2

Don't sell yourself short; you never know what you can do until you try. You can do more than you think you can.



I think the same goes for leadership. You don't really know until you give it a shot. And you can't always rely on the perceptions of others to give an accurate assessment of what your potential is. The only real way to be sure if you can do something or not is to get out there and try.

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“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who ... spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

- Theodore Roosevelt

TIP #3

To improve at something, focus on making one small step forward every day.



But you also don't run 50 miles on the first day. So you pick one thing, one small step that will get you closer to your goal and you do that. Run one mile. Do it today. Lace up your shoes and do it now. Tomorrow, run another one. The day after that – do it again. Soon you will find that you can do a little bit more. Be consistent, show up every day ready to put in the effort. You will be amazed at what you can do.

What's the takeaway here? You don't know until you try. As with running, you can always get better at leadership. Pick one thing to learn about and work on, then lace up your shoes and give it a try. Tomorrow, do it again. The day after that, add another little something.

TIP #4

Don't try to be the best in the world, just work on being a little better every day; you will be amazed at how far that approach will get you.



Will you be the next great leader of our generation? No, odds are that you probably won't. I think the greatest ones had a natural talent, a pre-disposition, and the formative environment that gave them great advantages. But they still had to work at becoming great.

Can you become a good, solid leader who is respected by his peers and able to get the job done through people? Absolutely. But it's going to take some work. We have to put in the miles every day. Are you ready to get started?



Example is Leadership. - Albert Schweitzer

SET THE FOUNDATION



“The quality of a leader is reflected in the standards they set for themselves.”

- Ray Kroc

OK, so everyone has the potential to become a good leader. Great. Where do you start?

The common question to ask is: What does it take to be a good leader? Maybe you have asked that question yourself. But it turns out you already know the answer. You already know because you can answer a different question: What are the characteristics of someone you would be willing to follow?

This is worth thinking about. Go ahead, take a minute, and write down the top five characteristics that to you would make someone worth following. Actually take the time and do this.

If it helps, imagine you are an employee in a business, and you were just put on a team with several others to work on a project. You are getting ready to go to the first meeting, where you will meet the person you will have to work directly for the next several months. What do you hope they will be like?

Write down your top five things:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____