



The Secret Life of a Leader

Success In public requires preparation in private

Tim Stevenson

EFFECTIVE LEADERS ARE easy to spot. All you must do is examine the quality and accomplishments of their followers. Performance is reality.

Like the world of sports, however, observers often focus only on the successful outcome. They see the leader as she or he is today, but seldom asking what is behind it. How did they get that way?

The answer was identified by a championship basketball coach. Discussing the team's success, a reporter wondered if it came from the players' "will to win." The coach replied, "The most important thing is not the will to win. The most important thing is the will to *prepare* to win."

The will to prepare for success

The coach was indicating that success on a basketball floor requires more than effort during the game. Games are won on the practice floor, in the weight room, even in the cafeteria. All the "will to win" in the world cannot help a poorly conditioned, undisciplined team to succeed.

The same principle applies to leadership. Leaders perform their most obvious functions in public, but their success depends upon what other people seldom see: Their secret life of preparation.

If you want to succeed as a leader, preparation is not something you begin to do when the need arises, or it will be too late. For any aspiring leader, preparation must be a lifestyle. Here are some applications.

1. A commitment to life-long learning

There is never a point in leadership where you know enough. No one "masters" leadership. History is littered with accounts of leaders with long track records of success



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who encountered some new challenge and crashed. Rigorous life-long learning is the best possible preparation for an unpredictable future. The wider you mentally explore and push the boundaries of your knowledge, the more raw materials you can draw on to meet the challenges of the present.

For most leaders, this has meant avid regular reading. President Harry S. Truman said, “Not all readers can be leaders. But all leaders must be readers.” I have never met a successful leader who would disagree.

We must admit that a great many people in our time do not enjoy reading. They think of it as work rather than a pleasure. If you’re in that category, let me offer a few thoughts.

First, I’m not suggesting that you take on reading hours at a time. Most people are surprised by this: If you will read just 15-20 minutes a day, you can read 15-20 *books* in a year. Imagine the impact on your professional and personal life by reading 100 books in the next five years.

Second, you don’t have to read words on a page. These days, you can listen to books while you commute or do other traveling. More and more books are published on audio, so you have many to choose from.

Third, there are all kinds of other stimulating and educational materials available. For example, I have benefited from many courses from the Teaching Company (also known as the Great Courses Company). There are also podcasts, TED talks, and innumerable things on YouTube.

Finally, a warning from Mark Twain: “The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read at all.” That word of wisdom also applies to the other avenues mentioned above. With so many kinds of learning vehicles available, what excuse should anyone have for failing to invest in their personal and professional growth?

2. Make time to think

As an executive coach, I work with people at all levels of companies in widely differing industries. Yet, I hear the same complaints and challenges no matter where I am. One of the most common is the sense that people’s jobs are out of control. They are working as hard as they can but feel like a hamster running on a wheel.

The root of this is an attitude. I call it “passive reactivity.” It occurs when a well-meaning professional steps into the current of their day in the morning and proceeds to *react* to other people and stimuli. After ten or more hours they step out of the current and reflect: “I’m very tired. I’ve worked very hard. But what have I actually accomplished?” Too often, the answer is depressingly little of importance.

For anyone, the way off the hamster wheel begins with thinking time. You must create space for reflection and planning in order to grow more intentional and intelligent in your use of time and attention.

Efficiency means “doing things right” (quicker, easier, cheaper). Effectiveness means “doing the right things.” Leaders are responsible for their own effectiveness, and for the effectiveness of their entire sphere. If there is anyone who cannot afford to operate by passive reactivity, it is a group’s leader.

If you aspire to lead, my advice to you is to create windows in your schedule for thinking. It might mean “making yourself scarce.” This does not necessarily mean hours at a time. Often, it’s just thirty minutes at a coffee shop or eating lunch at a restaurant alone. For a leader, time to think is not a luxury. It’s a requirement.

3. Cultivate stimulating relationships

Another way to remain mentally and emotionally stimulated and fresh is by building and maintaining both personal and professional

relationships. There are several benefits:

- Maintaining your support network

If you were fortunate to own a high-performance sports car, you would expect it to require careful and regular maintenance. High-performing people are the same. Anyone who wants to operate at a high level professionally needs to apply deliberate effort toward self-maintenance. The people in our lives are a vital part of our support system. Leaders particularly need a network of people who provide support, advice, guidance, and encouragement.

- Getting out of your bubble

Long-term immersion in any company, department, or team leads to a kind of mental dullness. Creativity tends to decline. Problems seem more unsolvable. By getting out of the bubble and interacting with outsiders, there is a sense of fresh air. Their outsider's perspective can illumine situations. They have often encountered similar problems and solved them, meaning you don't have to reinvent the wheel.

- Friendships are fun

Need I say more? It's OK to have some fun in your life, no matter how serious you are about your profession.

4. Have a life outside of work

A young man once asked management guru Peter Drucker what one thing he could do to be better in business. Drucker's reply was, "Learn how to play the violin."

Drucker was known for having a sense of humor to go with his unsurpassed knowledge of management, but he was not just teasing in his answer. He was making a serious point: To gain a sharper mind for business, stretch and grow your mind on subjects other than business.

The benefits of investing time outside of business are many. We can rest and recharge, mentally and emotionally. Creating mental and emotional space apart from the daily grind allows intuition and creativity to thrive, enabling better problem-solving. We not only derive enjoyment and life-long learning, but we can also grow in wisdom, which is useful for any pursuit, including business.

I have found wisdom for business through learning about science, history, baseball, biographies, music, and other seemingly unrelated subjects. These have all stimulated creativity for me. I have played guitar since I was thirteen years old and have derived hours of enjoyment and refreshment from it. There have been many times I was frustrated with a business problem, unable to break through. One of the most effective things I have done is to walk away from my desk and play some rock and roll for an hour. Many times, the answer I was looking for came to me while playing on our back patio.

Conclusion

In 1940 Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Great Britain at the direst point in his nation's history. Writing later about that moment, Churchill observed, "I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and this trial."

While few of us will ever bear leadership responsibility in world-changing events, there is a sense in which any leader can say the same: "All my life has been preparation for this time and challenge."

You can be sure: Successful leaders have prepared themselves and made it a lifestyle, most often when no one was watching. **L**