True North

By Bill George

True North is the internal compass that guides you successfully through life. It represents who you are as a human being at your deepest level. It is your orienting point — your fixed point in a spinning world — that helps you stay on track as a leader. Your True North is based on what is most important to you, your most cherished values, your passions and motivations, the sources of satisfaction in your life. Just as a compass points toward a magnetic pole, your True North pulls you toward the purpose of your leadership. When you follow your internal compass, your leadership will be authentic, and people will naturally want to associate with you. Although others may guide or influence you, your truth is derived from your life story and only you can determine what it should be.

Discovering your True North takes a lifetime of commitment and learning. Each day, as you are tested in the world, you yearn to look at yourself in the mirror and respect the person you see and the life you have chosen to lead. Some days will be better than others, but as long as you are true to who you are, you can cope with the most difficult circumstances that life presents.

The world may have very different expectations for you and your leadership than you have for yourself. Regardless of whether you are leading a small team or are at the top of a powerful organization, you will be pressured by external forces to respond to their needs and seduced by rewards for fulfilling those needs. These pressures and seductions may cause you to detour from your True North. When you get too far off course, your internal compass tells you that something is wrong and you need to reorient yourself. It requires courage and resolve to resist the constant pressures and expectations confronting you and to take corrective action when necessary.

The Leadership Crisis

An enormous vacuum in leadership exists today — in business, politics, government, education, religion and nonprofit organizations. Yet there is no shortage of people with the capacity for leadership. The problem is that we have a wrongheaded notion of what constitutes a leader, driven by an obsession with leaders at the top. That misguided standard often results in the wrong people attaining critical leadership roles.

“True North” is written for anyone who wants to be an authentic leader. It is for leaders at all stages of their lives, from those at the top of organizations to students preparing to become leaders to lifelong leaders looking for new opportunities. You are never too young, or too old, to take on leadership challenges and to lead authentically. It is grounded in the hundreds of years of experience of the 125 authentic...
Leaders we interviewed as well as my own 40 years in leadership roles.

Authentic leaders not only inspire those around them, they empower them to step up and lead. Thus, we offer the new definition of leadership: The authentic leader brings people together around a shared purpose and empowers them to step up and lead authentically in order to create value for all stakeholders.

In “Authentic Leadership,” I described authentic leaders as genuine people who are true to themselves and to what they believe in. They engender trust and develop genuine connections with others. Because people trust them, they are able to motivate others to high levels of performance. Rather than letting the expectations of other people guide them, they are prepared to be their own person and go their own way. As they develop as authentic leaders, they are more concerned about serving others than they are about their own success or recognition.

This is not to say that authentic leaders are perfect. Far from it. Every leader has weaknesses and all are subject to human frailties and mistakes. Yet by acknowledging their shortcomings and admitting their errors, they connect with people and empower them.

Leaders are defined by their values and values are personal — they cannot be determined by anyone else. Integrity, however, is the one value required of every authentic leader. If you do not have integrity, no one will trust you, nor should they. The values of authentic leaders are shaped by their personal beliefs and developed through study, introspection, consultation with others and years of experience. The test of authentic leaders’ values is not what they say but the values they practice under pressure. If leaders are not true to the values they profess, people quickly lose confidence in their leadership.

Authentic leaders lead with their hearts as well as their hands. To some, leading with the heart may sound soft, as though authentic leaders cannot make tough choices involving pain and loss. Leading with the heart is anything but soft. It means having passion for your work, compassion for the people you serve, empathy for the people you work with and the courage to make difficult decisions. Courage is an especially important quality for leaders as they navigate through unpredictable terrain.

**What Causes Disorientation?**

Before people take on leadership roles, they should first ask themselves two fundamental questions: “What motivates me to lead?” and “What is the purpose of my leadership?” If honest answers to the first question are simply power, prestige and money, leaders risk being trapped by external gratification as the source of their fulfillment. There is nothing wrong with desiring these outward symbols as long as they are combined with a deeper desire to serve something greater than oneself.

Leaders whose goal is gaining power over others, maximizing wealth or becoming famous tend to look to other people for satisfaction and acknowledgement of their status. In public and in private, they display a high degree of narcissism. As leaders of institutions, they ultimately believe that the institution cannot survive without them because in their mind they are the institution. A tragic example of this was Richard Grasso in his closing days as CEO of the New York Stock Exchange. Grasso got so caught up in his power and celebrity that he lost touch with the negative reaction to a public servant receiving a $130 million compensation package and was forced to resign by his board.

In contrast, Xerox CEO Anne Mulcahy deflects most media attention, in spite of her success in turning the company around. She told us about receiving a telephone call from her mentor, former CEO David Kearns, when she was in the darkest hours of trying to keep the company out of bankruptcy and fending off an SEC investigation. “Mulcahy, do you believe all that bull they are writing about you in the newspapers?” Kearns asked over the phone. “No, David,” Mulcahy replied calmly. “Good,” responded Kearns. “Then don’t believe it when they start writing about you as the savior of Xerox.”

**Transformation from ‘I’ to ‘We’**

I experienced a series of crucibles that ultimately transformed my approach to leadership. From my earliest days my father encouraged me to become a leader. … When I wasn’t chosen for high school leadership roles, I ran for elected office and was disappointed not to win. Discouraged, I went off to Georgia Tech so I could have a
fresh start where no one knew me. … I learned the hard way that I couldn’t escape my past unless I changed myself in the present. I ran for office in my college fraternity six times and lost every time. Clearly, I had not learned why others did not want to follow me.

At this point a group of seniors took me under their wing and gave me some sound advice. “Bill, you have a lot of ability, but you come across as more interested in getting ahead than you are in helping other people. No wonder no one wants to follow your lead.” Although devastated by this feedback, I took their advice to heart. I talked to my peers about what I was doing wrong and how I could change. Eventually, the changes took hold, and I was chosen for more leadership positions than I could take on. Most rewarding of all was being selected as fraternity president by the same people who had rejected me earlier.

In my mid-20s I experienced the most significant crucibles of my life. An only child, I was extremely close to my mother, who gave me unconditional love. When she died suddenly of cancer and a heart attack, I went into a period of deep reflection about the purpose of my life. Eighteen months later, as I was only three weeks away from being married, my fiancee died suddenly from a malignant brain tumor. Her death came as an incredible shock. Once again, I felt all alone in the world. Had it not been for the power of prayer and the support of my friends, I might not have recovered.

Not long after that, I had the blessing of meeting my future wife, Penny. She was very empathetic about my experiences, and a year later we were married. I can honestly say that she has been the best thing that ever happened to me. In addition to being a great wife and mother, Penny is an outstanding counselor to me.

Even so, I still wasn’t out of the woods. I saw myself on an unbroken sprint to the top of a major corpor-
ation. By age 30, I was president of Litton Microwave, the pioneer and leader in the emerging U.S. consumer microwave oven industry. For the next five years I led our team in creating the field of consumer microwave cooking. Toward the end of that time, the board of directors of our parent company, Litton Industries, visited our rapidly growing division. I was proud to explain how we had grown at 55 percent per year and had become the largest profit contributor in the corporation. Sailing high, I was pulled aside after the meeting by the corporate CEO, who offered some stern advice. “Young man, you’re still in the honeymoon phase here. You don’t have a clue what business is all about. Wait until you have to turn around failing businesses.”

His advice really angered me. I thought he was the one who didn’t have a clue about how to create growth businesses. Was I ever wrong. A year later I left Litton and joined Honeywell, with the opportunity to lead a global corporation. As I was asked to turn around one business after another, I recognized that Litton’s CEO had been absolutely right. During my fourth major turnaround, I finally looked at myself in the mirror and admitted this was not how I wanted to spend my life.

I was in the midst of a severe crucible but had been too busy to recognize it. I finally faced the reality that my unhappiness at work was harming my marriage, my relationship to our sons and my close friendships. Maybe my destiny was not to be CEO of Honeywell after all or maybe I would not enjoy the job if I got it.

At that point I talked with my wife, my best friend, and a group of men I met with each week and asked them all for candid feedback. They had seen what was happening and were pleased I was finally facing it. I was so focused on becoming CEO that I had lost sight of the purpose of my leadership — to benefit the lives of others.

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For all my earlier work, I had not fully made the transition from “I” to “we.”

Three times I had turned down the opportunity to become president and CEO of Medtronic, the creator of the pacemaker, because I did not believe the company suited my ambition to lead a large company. Back then, it was only one-third the size of the sector I was leading at Honeywell. Facing up to my need for a renewed sense of purpose, I called Medtronic back to find out if the position was still open.

Several months later, after conversations about the Medtronic mission with founder Earl Bakken, I joined Medtronic as president. My 13 years there became the best professional experience of my life. By embracing the Medtronic mission of restoring people to full life and health, and discovering the purpose of my leadership in serving patients and empowering 30,000 employees, I was finally on the right side of the transformation from “I” to “we.”

**Professional Support Network**

Many leaders develop professional peer networks both within and outside their organizations to consult with them about important issues and to provide counsel and guidance. EBay’s (John) Donahoe noted, “You can learn a little bit from a lot of people.” Rob Chess, chairman of Nektar Therapeutics, commented, “If someone does something very well, I try to understand how I can apply it to my work.” Some leaders mentioned the value of their involvement with executive roundtable groups and professional organizations like the Young Presidents’ Organization. YPO provides a forum where members can talk openly about their challenges and a network to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

Having a peer support structure within your organization can be invaluable, because colleagues may be facing comparable experiences, have insights about things you do not see or be in a position to offer you real-time feedback on your leadership. Because being on top of an organization can be lonely and isolating, some leaders use subordinates as an advisory network, even in the most difficult business circumstances.

CEOs look to members of their board of directors for advice at crucial points, so why not have your own personal board of directors? Your board might include several highly trusted personal and professional advisers, people you respect for their professional expertise, insights and wisdom and for their commitment to your personal well-being. Your team can also include close friends, mentors, your lawyer, financial planner or personal coach. You can meet with them on a regular basis or when you are facing especially difficult decisions.

Your journey to leadership is likely to take unexpected turns. Life is full of challenging situations, including ethical dilemmas, midcourse career changes or burnout, seemingly intractable interpersonal challenges with colleagues, marriage and family issues, failures and loneliness. At times you may feel you are losing your way or have gotten off the course of your True North.

Getting back on track alone is very difficult. That is when you most need your support team. It is important to build your team long before there is a crisis in your life.

**Staying Grounded**

Taking sabbaticals is (one) way in which authentic leaders ground themselves. John Donahoe’s sabbatical lasted three months. Brenda Barnes was away from the workplace for several years to focus on her family before she returned to the corporate world as president of Sara Lee. Many other leaders, such as Joe Rogers Jr. (IM 68), also took sabbaticals.

Rogers did not take long to become CEO. At 26 he was put in charge of Waffle House, a chain of breakfast restaurants owned by his family. After early success in his new role, relationships with his people grew strained as he tried to change the firm’s direction. He explained, “By the end of the 1970s, I was fed up. A lot of people were opposing what I was trying to get done. Finally, I just threw up my hands and asked myself, ‘Do I want to keep beating my head against this wall?’”

Rogers took a six-month sabbatical and went to Solana Beach outside San Diego. He lived on the beach for six months, ran every day and learned to surf while he thought about his options. “Finally, I said to myself, ‘Is this really my people’s fault? Maybe I’m the problem. I may have the right ideas, but I’m not providing the right leadership.’”

He returned to the business and unveiled a new corporate strategy. He told his team, “We’re stopping the growth and committing to quality first. It’s no longer bigger and better. It’s better before bigger. If we don’t get better, we haven’t earned the right to get bigger.” Rogers’ organization quickly solidified around the new strategy as Waffle House was transformed into a success story that has been sustained for 30 years.

**What Will Your Legacy Be?**

Why not take the opportunity to think about that question right now, while you are still writing your life story? Just as it is never too late to lead, it is never too late to make a difference in the world and to leave a legacy for those who come along after you. But only you can answer that question. When you know your answer, you will also recognize why leadership is so fulfilling.