

Finding Your True North

A Personal Guide

Bill George
Andrew N. McLean
Nick Craig

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Finding Your True North

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Authentic Leadership

True North

Warren Bennis

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*Bill George dedicates this book to his wife, Penny, and his sons, Jeff and Jon,
and daughters-in-law, Renee and Jeannette,
all of whom are authentic leaders pursuing their own passions.*

*Andrew McLean dedicates this book to his wife, Kathleen, and his son Aidan,
in the hope that authentic leaders will make a difference in the world.*

*Nick Craig dedicates this book to the authentic leaders in his life,
who showed him the way by being just themselves.*

Preface

Why a Personal Guide to *True North*?

by Bill George

Leadership matters. It matters a great deal—to our organizations and institutions, to the people who work in them, and to the people who are served by them. For our society to function effectively, we need authentic leaders who can encourage people to perform at their best and step up and lead themselves.

I wrote *True North* because I have a passion to see more people in all walks of life lead authentically and because I wanted to help people like you discover your authentic leadership.

Finding Your True North: A Personal Guide will enable you to take the ideas and lessons from the book *True North* and apply them to your personal leadership development. This will enable you to become a highly effective—and authentic—leader who knows your True North and stays on its course.

DISCOVERING YOUR AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Becoming an authentic leader takes hard work. It is not much different from becoming a great musician or a great athlete. To become great in any endeavor—whether it is in your career, your family, or your community—you must use the unique strengths you were born with and develop them to the fullest, while acknowledging and learning from your shortcomings.

In my case, I had to work very hard to become a leader, enduring disappointing defeats and rejections in high school and early college years and searching for

many years to find the right place to flourish as a leader. I had to make the “leadership journey into my own soul” that General Electric’s Jeff Immelt describes in order to find out who I am, where my real passions lie, and how I could become more effective as a leader. I didn’t have a personal guide like this one to help me, so I made up my development plan as I went along, with the help of my wife, close friends, and some important mentors along the way.

After searching for a role model for many years, I learned that I could never become a great leader by emulating someone else or by minimizing my shortcomings. As “Director of the Year” Reatha Clark King told me, “If you’re aiming to be like somebody else, you’re being a copycat because you think that’s what people want you to do. You’ll never be a star with that kind of thinking. But you might be a star—unreplicable—by following your passion.”

Many leadership books offer a quick fix to becoming a leader, or provide you with seven easy steps to leadership. Unfortunately, leadership development doesn’t work that way, any more than you can become a great athlete by reading a book. To realize your potential as a leader, you need a detailed development program that will enable you to become an excellent leader. That’s the purpose of *Finding Your True North*: to enable you to develop a clear and detailed program for your personal leadership development.

I encourage you to have as many leadership experiences early in life as you can. Don’t sit back and wait for these experiences to come to you. Seek them out! After each experience, you should process them by going back to your development plan to see what changes you need to make or further experiences you should have.

Recall the fundamental messages from *True North*:

- *You can discover your authentic leadership right now.*
- *You do not have to be born with the characteristics or traits of a leader.*
- *You do not have to wait for a tap on your shoulder.*
- *You do not have to be at the top of your organization.*
- *You can step up to lead at any point in your life: you’re never too young—or too old.*
- *Leadership is your choice, not your title.*

USING THIS PERSONAL GUIDE

Finding Your True North offers you a series of exercises that will enable you to go deeper into your life story, discover your passions, and develop into an authentic leader. It starts with an exploration of your life story and its relationship to your leadership. Then, you will examine the leadership experiences you have had thus far in your life, as well as your challenges and disappointments. You will have the opportunity to explore ways that you might get pulled off course from your True North.

After that, you will be ready to delve more deeply into the greatest crucible of your life and to understand and frame your experiences at a deeper level. This understanding can enable you to make the transformation from an “I” leader to a “We” leader.

Next you will go to work on the five key elements of your personal development as a leader: gaining self-awareness, clarifying your values and principles, understanding your motivations, building your support team, and leading an integrated life.

In the final section, you will author your leadership, exploring your leadership purpose, understanding how you can be an empowering leader, and examining ways to optimize your leadership effectiveness.

After completing this work, you are ready to create your Personal Leadership Development Plan (PLDP). This is a dynamic document that you can return to in future years to assess your progress, update your plan based on experiences since it was created, and prepare for the next phase of your leadership journey.

SHOULD I WORK WITH OTHERS WHILE USING THIS GUIDE?

Your responses to the exercises and your notes in this personal guide are your confidential work. However, we do encourage you to share them with others, including your trusted mentors, coaches, support team, and leadership discussion group. This feedback will be invaluable to you in developing your PLDP.

As you share yourself, your story, and your answers with others close to you, take the risk of revealing your vulnerabilities. You will find that sharing with others in this way is a very liberating experience. When you are open with others,

they in turn will feel safe in being open with you, and you will form deeper bonds. There are several ways you can use this guide:

1. As an individual, you can do the exercises on your own and prepare your PLDP.
2. You can work through this personal guide as a group with friends or even new acquaintances, as each of you completes the exercises individually, discusses the results openly with the other members of the group, and solicits their feedback. Then it can be helpful to go back to the exercises and update them, based on the feedback.

Your group can be led by a professional facilitator, who guides your discussion and keeps the group on track. Or you can create a peer-facilitated group, in which leadership of the group rotates to a different group member for each session. We have used this latter approach very successfully with six-person Leadership Discussion Groups (LDGs) in my Authentic Leadership Development classes at Harvard Business School. (See Appendix B for suggestions on forming such a group.)
3. To enhance your work on your leadership, you can use *Finding Your True North* under the guidance of a coach or mentor. Your coach or mentor can work with you on each of the exercises, give you valuable feedback, and encourage you to explore yourself and your story more deeply.
4. You can use this personal guide with your team at work. It will enable team members to discover their authentic leadership and help the team function more effectively because they understand each other better through sharing their stories. As team leader, you can guide your team through the process, or you can use a professional team-building consultant and facilitator.
5. You can use this guide along with *True North* as the basis for a course on leadership development, either in an academic setting or in an organization. It has the flexibility to be used with leaders at all stages in their careers: young leaders, including college and graduate students; midcareer leaders; leaders at the top of their organizations;

and leaders embarking on the third phase of their leadership journeys after they have completed their principle leadership roles.

In the case of a larger group, you will need a professor, teacher, or leadership development professional to structure the material and lead the group. Such a course should include the cases listed in Appendix C that were specifically developed for use in leadership development courses. In addition, it is highly recommended that your group be broken into smaller LDGs for discussion of more personal matters.

A FINAL WORD TO USERS OF THIS PERSONAL GUIDE

As you embark on discovering your authentic leadership by moving into the heart of this guide, let me offer my personal welcome to you in your desire to become an authentic leader and to follow your True North. I encourage you to be completely open and transparent as you look inside yourself and answer the very challenging and difficult questions posed in the exercises. Have the courage to explore your life story deeply to understand who you are as a human being, where you fit in this world, how you can use your leadership to impact the world in a positive way, and how you can leave a lasting legacy.

I am excited about the opportunity that you and thousands of leaders like you have to transform organizations and institutions in business, the nonprofit world, governments, education, and religion, as you bring authenticity to the workplace and encourage others to lead in the same way.

Your dedication to becoming an authentic leader will indeed make this world a better and richer place for all of us to live in.

February 2008

BILL GEORGE
MINNEAPOLIS

Introduction

Why Authentic Leadership Development?

Something ignited in my soul. . . . And I went my
own way, deciphering that burning fire.

—Pablo Neruda

Why is it important for you to become an authentic leader?

There are many leaders who get ahead in organizations who are anything *but* authentic. You have certainly met them. They may be domineering people who use their power to rise up the ladder and are willing to take advantage of less powerful people to get ahead. They may be constantly directing, controlling, and dealing with others aggressively. Often they seem incapable of accepting honest feedback. Sometimes they willingly use other people to hit their numbers. They might stretch the truth or seize political advantage if it makes them look good. They are likely to make a lot of money on their way to fame and glory.

You could be this kind of leader.

“What’s wrong with that?” you ask.

Plenty. Leaders like these cannot motivate people toward a common goal. They are incapable of building trust within organizations. In short, they are ineffective leaders.

Worse, leaders like this destroy good people. They destroy great organizations. Although they may be successful in the short term, over time their behavior catches up with them. Then they either move on or watch their organizations steadily decline.

Do you want to be an effective leader who can sustain success over an extended period of time? Then it is essential that you discover your authentic

leadership. This personal guide will enable you to become an authentic—and effective—leader. It will help you understand your True North and develop a plan to stay on course, no matter how difficult the challenges you may face.

Before we dig into the details of *how* you can discover your authentic leadership, let's examine why being authentic is so essential to your effectiveness as a leader.

Leading in the twenty-first century is vastly different from leading in the twentieth century. People in organizations have changed dramatically—to the point where they will no longer tolerate or be motivated by the “command and control” leaders of the twentieth century. Nor will they be impressed by charismatic leaders who say one thing and do another.

Over the last fifty years, all of us followed powerful leaders who seemed to know where they were going, only to discover that often they were leading us down destructive paths. Or that these leaders were only out for themselves and were unconcerned with our well-being. Organizations expected us to be loyal to our leaders and wait in line for our turn to lead, if it ever came. And then we learned that our loyalty was not returned, as we witnessed many people lose their pensions and their health care. As a consequence, we lost trust in our leaders. In recent years, many of us were dazzled by charismatic leaders who impressed everyone with their charm, yet went off the deep end.

People in organizations today seek authentic leaders whom they can trust, but they are not so easily fooled or so quick to offer their loyalty. They are knowledge workers who often know more than their bosses. They want the opportunity to step up and lead now; they won't wait in line for ten to twenty years. If they can't find those opportunities, they are quite prepared to move on, as they have multiple options and refuse to get locked into negative situations. They are willing to work extremely hard, but will do so only for a cause they believe in, as they are seeking meaning and significance in their work. They are willing to trust their leaders only if these leaders prove themselves worthy of their trust.

If you want to be *effective* as a leader, then you must be an *authentic leader*. If you are not authentic, the best people won't want to work with you, and they won't give you their best work.

What does it take to be both authentic and effective as a leader?

- You must align people around a common purpose that inspires them to peak performance.
- You must unite them around a common set of values, so that people know precisely what is expected of them. You should serve as a role model for these values.
- You must empower people to step up and lead so that people throughout the organization are highly motivated and give their best to the organization.
- You must serve all your constituencies; as a leader, you bear the responsibility of serving your customers, employees, shareholders, and communities.

This is not easy. It is the hard side of leadership.

The easy side of leadership is getting the short-term numbers right. Lots of smart people can figure out how to do that. It is much more difficult to get people aligned, empowered, and committed to serve all their constituencies.

Being *authentic* as a leader creates a virtuous circle, as the best people will want to work with you. As a result, the performance of your teams will be superior, and you will be able to take on greater challenges.

The bottom line is this: in the twenty-first century, without authenticity in leadership, there will be no sustained effectiveness in organizations.

With authentic leadership, the potential for organizations to compete and to excel is unlimited.

WHAT IS AN AUTHENTIC LEADER?

Let's start by describing the authentic leader.

To be an authentic leader requires you to be genuine and to have a passion for your purpose; you must practice your values, lead with your heart, develop connected relationships, and have the self-discipline to get results. You must stay on course of your True North in the face of the most severe challenges, pressures, and seductions.

This means being true to yourself and to what you believe in, which will enable you to engender trust and develop genuine connections with others. Because people trust you, you will be able to motivate them to high levels of performance. Rather than letting the expectations of others guide you, you must be prepared to be your own person and go your own way. As you develop as an authentic leader, you will be more concerned about serving others than about your own success or recognition.

This does not mean you have to be perfect. Far from it. Like all of us, you can have your weaknesses and be subject to the full range of human frailties and mistakes, and still be an authentic leader. Yet by acknowledging your shortcomings and admitting your errors, you will connect with people and empower them.

Purpose

To find your purpose, you must first understand yourself and your passions. In turn, your passions show the way to the purpose of your leadership.

Values

As a leader, you are defined by your values, which are the deeply held beliefs that guide your actions. Your values are personal: they cannot be determined by anyone except you. To lead by your values is to give expression to your most deeply held beliefs through your leadership. The test of your values is not what you say, but how you behave under pressure. If you are not true to the values you profess, people will quickly lose confidence in your leadership.

Heart

As an authentic leader, you must lead with your heart as well as your head. This means having passion for your work, compassion for the people you serve, empathy for the people with whom you work, and the courage to make difficult decisions.