

# THE LEADERSHIP JOURNEY OVER A LIFETIME: HOW LEARNING MOMENTS CAN BE TRANSFORMATIVE

*Garry Ridge*

**A**s we rise through the ranks of our own careers, the pace at which we're asked, "How did you do that?" accelerates. You're getting important things done. And you are to be congratulated. And debriefed, in a variety of ways. Podcasts, speaking appearances, article assignments, book contracts, consulting opportunities.

There's a question, however, I rarely hear. And it's conspicuous in its silence: "How did you *become* the person who was equipped to do that?" There must come a time when professional development efforts transform into personal development aspirations. (As Frances Hesselbein once said, "Leadership is a matter of how to be.") Otherwise, all those flashy skills and strategies that turn into happy headlines lose the opportunity to deepen into enduring legacy that can influence the destiny of an entire culture.

The kind of legacy that outlasts even your own in-person tenure at your company—that long stretch into its future (no longer *your* future) when your card key has stopped working and the mention of your name elicits the question, "Who?" If you want to transform your company in a way that the changes will stick over time, you'll have to start by transforming yourself *now* in ways that will also stick over time.

My own card key has stopped working. I have recently concluded what I call my "25-year apprenticeship" as CEO of WD-40 Company, to enter into the next phase of whatever influence I can wield to benefit (hopefully) new generations of leaders coming up behind me in a variety of companies throughout the world. But I still shift uncomfortably in my seat when those words "Chairman Emeritus" appear on PowerPoint slides under my name. That's an awfully fancy expression for a bloke who is still, and always be, at heart, just a traveling salesman from Down Under.

Somewhere along the line, I must have grown into the role of CEO. Because here I am. Or, to be more precise, there I was. And now my new role is to teach leaders, "Here's how you can do it too." But what I'd really like to say is, "Here's how you can *become* the person who can do it too."

If I can do it, a kid from the Sydney suburb of Five Dock, who left formal education at 16 because he'd rather learn first-hand how to sell stuff, I have to believe that anyone can do it. I like to say, "It's simple but it's not easy." To be honest, on most days, it can be pretty easy, too. As long as your heart is humble and in the right place, your mind is open to new ideas and voices from unexpected sources, and you've got your values screwed on right. That's the hard part, actually.

But when you square those challenges away, then it's pretty much no worries mate.

## Releasing Control to Transform From Within

What is business—especially an epically successful one—other than good fortune, insight, farsight, and hard work combined to find a repeatable solution to a predictable problem? For our customers, we develop a thing or a methodology, to address a challenge or dream they're willing to pay money to address. Develop it once and sell it over and over and over again. Maybe with improvements and a few variations on the theme from time to time. In organizational leadership, internally, we develop strategies and standard operating procedures to achieve the efficiencies of dependable prevention, action, or solution. Think it through thoroughly, so the theory goes, implement it consistently (applying new learnings as you go) and Bob's your uncle. On to the next challenge. The next unmet need that presents itself as an opportunity. Or new dream.

Once you achieve a senior-most leadership role, however, you quickly realize that having your hands in all the functions of the enterprise is an inefficient use of your time and viewpoint from the more elevated position. Assuming you have been a wise leader, there are already people in place throughout your organization who are much better at those functions than you could ever be. And you are also wise enough (and humble enough) to recognize that fact.

Pretty soon you have to pick what you want to focus on. And to do that, you also have to pick what you want your next personal iteration to evolve into. And stay in that lane.

For me, I wasn't about to get involved in the R&D labs and make everyone's lives miserable by insisting on WD-41, a vanity formula that everyone would point to and say "He did it, isn't he wonderful?" Not a chance. I relished talking to investors about the company's performance in the previous quarter and what our prospects were coming up. But was I going to tell the CFO to shove over? Uh. No.

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My dad's words to me when I was considering my first job offer there, "You can't go wrong with that stuff, son," still inspired me every day. Now my mission was to convey "You can't go wrong with this opportunity" to investors. And, even more emotionally compelling, "You can't go wrong with this career" to the WD-40 Company community of employees (our tribe members), present, past, and future. That was the stuff that I would be selling to employees now—emotionally rewarding careers with gratifying futures.

By the time I was promoted to CEO, I had already spent 10 years as an individual contributor. So, I understood the current WD-40 Company experience as a tribe member (we weren't calling ourselves that yet). I understood how to market the blue and yellow can with the little red top. And I was learning how to transfer my belief in the company, its strategies, and its products into the hearts and minds—well, mainly minds—of investors, large and small. My self-assigned mandate as the new CEO: To duplicate the user experience of WD-40 Multi-Use Product as the employee experience of the corporate culture. In other words, to make the day-to-day work life of our people as friction-free as possible. But how would I, could I, do that?

## The CEO's Primary Purpose

Then one day on a trans-Pacific flight between Sydney and San Diego, I read a quote by the Dalai Lama that would change everything for me.

"Our purpose in life is to make people happy. If you can't make them happy, at least don't hurt them."

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*I read a quote by the Dalai Lama that would change everything for me.*

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It appeared in a ripped-out article, long forgotten by now. So, the best I can do is attribute the quote. But I can't cite the article. The quote stayed with me and has since served as a governing filter in everything I do, decide, or act on. It became the starting point of my next career phase when I would dedicate myself to creating a corporate culture built on psychological safety (I didn't know it at that time, but 3,000 miles away at Harvard Business School, professor Amy Edmondson would soon begin her research on Edgar Schein's work on psychological safety). I wanted to create a workplace culture where people went to work every day happy in the knowledge that they would be doing meaningful work in the company of colleagues they liked, trusted, and respected. And they would go home happy to families who also benefited from the positivity and purpose of each tribe member.

This is where an audience would be waiting for my next set of slides to answer their question, "So how did you do it?" But the more interesting question is this: "How did you become the person who could lead an organization into such an inspiring transformation?"

The answer: It requires a fundamental, and then ongoing, transformation in the heart and mind of the CEO, and then, through the power of example, to the senior leadership and then onward to the entire tribe.

## Learning Moments Along the Way

The buck may stop with the CEO, but the transformation *starts* with the CEO. And in this

particular case, that was me. To make people happy and not hurt them, I was to discover again and again, I would have to initiate the change from deep within myself.

In Australia we have an expression you've probably heard, "Go walkabout." Among its many interpretations, it fundamentally means to go on a far-ranging expedition, beyond the familiar, comfort-zone, civilized environs of city and town. I'd like to coin a new expression, "Go walkwithin." That's what happened to me. To achieve the adventure of becoming the person, the CEO I wanted to be, I had to go on an adventure deep within. And be willing to transform, maybe not entirely, but definitely well inside the wild frontiers of interpersonal cultural leadership.

So when you ask, "How did you do that?" I'll assume you're asking, "How can I make the internal shifts I need in order to similarly inspire an entire organization that's committed to being built on trust, mutual support, forgiveness, knowledge sharing and risk-taking?"

But that's a long sentence, isn't it? "How did you do that?" will suffice. Your own personal development journey is your own, and it should be custom-designed to lead you precisely to your next desired iteration. But, in my leadership years, and now my executive coaching, I have identified some common points where your choice will be, "Do I want to take this choice and grow? Or do I want to retreat to the safe, familiar option?" I call those Learning Moments. And since they're so intrinsically important to every growth phase, let's start there:

**Make it safe to make mistakes:** When I first began thinking seriously about the Dalai Lama quote, one of the areas I focused on was "How do I foster a culture where our people won't be hurt?" One of the answers that eventually surfaced was, "Make it safe for well-meaning people to make honest mistakes and then, without shame, share their discoveries with others." With that, the concept of the Learning Moment was born. This is how I define a Learning Moment: "A positive or negative outcome of any situation that needs to be openly and freely shared to benefit all." As

a leader, you understandably want everyone to learn as they go. That includes you. And to learn as you go means that you will inevitably do it wrong, hurt a feeling, misunderstand someone, get a little ahead of yourself, make a public spectacle of yourself, make an error in judgment that makes you look like a fool for all the world to see. If you want to build a culture where your people can be secure in trying new ideas, saying a risky truth, activating a new strategy, making a stretch-goal commitment, you have to demonstrate that you're willing to take those risks too. And then humbly share your Learning Moments with the rest of your tribe so that they can see leadership truly in action.

**Have a purpose that extends far beyond the performance promise of your product—and subsequently your life's work.** I ask you, how long do you think I would have been excited to go to work every day to push yet another can of oil on the world? As proud as I was, and still am, of our product line, the words, "The squeak is gone!" could eventually become as rousing as B.B. King's mournful song, "The Thrill is Gone." Not very much, right? No squeak? So what? When's dinner?

At WD-40 Company our own song changed when we arrived at another, more inspiring, more enduring, purpose: To create positive, lasting memories. That new purpose changed everything for us. It even influenced our decision to exclude a toxic ingredient in a new product because it would threaten the health of everyone who used it—even with the explicit instructions on how to use it safely. We delayed production of the product until we could invent a new formulation. It meant giving our competitor first mover advantage in that space. But the decision was consistent with our purpose. Therefore, the right thing to do.

**Let your customers change your mind.** So, you have a great idea for a product. You do the necessary R&D, the focus groups, the market research. And you are good to launch. This is going to be amazing! Did you order enough to meet demand? Wait. What? No one wants it? Are you sure? How humiliating! How can a sure thing turn into an abject flop? Swallow your

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## *How can a sure thing turn into an abject flop?*

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pride and ask the would-have-been customers why they walked on by. Then make the necessary adjustments. Then humbly report back to your tribe and tell the whole sad story. Then tell the story of how your customers gave you the insight you needed to fix the situation.

**Stay in touch with those who remember the unpolished beginner you.** There are people who knew you before you had business cards and a LinkedIn account. Let them set you straight from time to time. Cherish those friendships, because there will soon become a time when none of your key cards will work. And you will still have each other. To remember. To laugh. To marvel at who you've become and how no one would have guessed. Way back when.

## **Conclusion**

Over five years ago, *Leader to Leader* editor-in-chief Sarah McArthur invited me to contribute an essay to a chapter anthology entitled *Work is Love Made Visible*, after a quote by Kahlil Gibran. The chapter topic (and title) we chose was "The Gift of Belonging." I reflected on how the ultimate gift of a healthy corporate culture can offer humankind, indeed the world, is to send the message that "You matter, you belong." I can't bear the thought of so many billions of people in this world

who live with the belief that they don't matter, they don't belong.

So, to conclude this article, I would like to say to all leaders everywhere, "You matter because you have the privilege of being able to create a place where people can come every day, do meaningful work in the company of colleagues they enjoy, respect and trust. And then can return home happy."

And because of this honor and mandate, should you choose to accept it, you belong too. And that's the best Learning Moment of them all.

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*Garry Ridge is Chairman Emeritus of WD-40 Company, after having served the company as President and CEO for 25 years, helping to grow it into one of the world's most recognized and beloved brands. He has been named by Inc. Magazine as one of the 10 Most Admired CEOs in the World. He now coaches other leaders internationally, supporting them in their own culture transformation efforts and professional growth. Any Dumb-Ass Can Do It: Learning Moments of an Everyday CEO of a Multi-Billion Dollar Company (by Garry Ridge and Martha Finney) was published by Matt Holt Books in March 2025.*

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*"You matter, you belong."*

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