REAL
AGAIN

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The Leadership Model is Broken.

What has happened to leadership? With all the crises and challenges we face, and the increasingly risk-averse environment in which we operate, leadership has become generic, ephemeral, and bland.

We have devolved from leaders into managers. Admiral Grace Murray Hopper said it best, "you manage things, but you lead people." The problem is we're no longer leading. We're hiding behind committees. We're using the crutches of data and metrics to make our decisions for us. We blame policies and corporate culture for the problems our teams face rather than delivering the tough messages with a sense of ownership.

The result of all of this is our people don't trust us anymore. Work has become transactional. They do the work and we pay them. It's a fee-for-service mindset. When they find someone who will pay them more for their services, they're gone. And when we no longer have need of their services, we simply cast those people aside. It's a toxic environment. It's hard for people to trust their leaders when they feel like they're simply a cog in the machine.

We are Broken as Leaders.

Raise your hand if you're burned out. Step forward if you're worried about your own uncertain future. Shout if you're feeling a little lost and unclear about where your career is headed. Stand up if you feel like your life is out of balance and you're running out of steam. Now look around you and take comfort in the fact that you're not alone.

**" *It's hard for people to trust their leaders when they feel like they're simply a cog in the machine.* **

The world has become hypercompetitive and change moves at a dizzying rate. More and more is demanded of us each day. In our "high performance cultures" it sometimes feels like a contest of who can burn themselves out the fastest.

And as we scurry along through a mind-numbing array of meetings, progress reviews, and workshops we lose something along the way—we lose sight of what's important. We miss seeing the damage we're doing to ourselves and our people. That's not leadership. That's failure.

We Talk Funny.

Many of us resort to using fancy words and frameworks to demonstrate our mastery of leadership. We synergize, leverage and optimize so at the end of the day the sum of our value added activities maximizes shareholder value, engages employees, and propels us to a best-in-class premier position in our industry.

That's a bunch of crap.

The words sound great but what do they mean? Would you trust a boss who spoke like this all the time? Neither would I. If that's the case, why do we speak to members of our teams this way?

Everyone wants to be authentic. It's one of the most overwrought concepts out there. Fortunately it's incredibly easy to be authentic—simply drop the pretenses and be yourself.

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So What's the Fix?

We need to get a grip on ourselves if we want to reverse the inexorable slide into management hell. The buzzwords and lingo need to die. We need to regain a sense of balance in our lives. We need to stop blaming processes, policies, and metrics for the decisions we make (or abdicate). We need to get back in touch with ourselves, our direction, our people, and our sanity. We need to embrace the notion that being authentic means just being ourselves—without pretence, with inadequacies, and with humility.

We need to make life simple again but not for simplicity's sake—for the sake of bringing clarity to the way we lead. We're going for profound yet clear. We're in search of elegance—defining a leadership style that is simple, straightforward, understandable, and practical. We need to articulate and live a style that matches our personality. We need to share that style with the members of our team so they understand us and find us more predictable. In doing so, we'll reestablish trust with them and lead them more effectively than a billion buzzwords would ever allow us to do.

One Person. A *Whole* Person.

If you want to be authentic and live a leadership style that's consistent, you first must embrace the notion that you're always the same you. At work. At home. At rest. With friends. It's always the same you. When you try to be something you're not in any of those realms, you cross the line into inauthentic. You need to strive for the strength of internal consistency that comes from accepting you're the same person no matter your circumstance.

Given that, when you articulate who you are and who you want to be as a leader you need to look at four aspects of leadership: leading yourself, leading the thinking, leading your people, and leading a balanced life. If you can define your views on leadership across those four aspects, you'll draw a complete picture of who you are in any circumstance. That complete picture will help you achieve balance and focus on all the areas that are critical elements of your success.

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Leading Yourself.

It's hard to reach your destination when you don't know where you're headed. Even if you know what your ultimate personal destination is, if you don't have guardrails in place to guide your behavior along the way you might find yourself far off the path you originally charted.

To lead yourself you must articulate what you want to be remembered for. What will your epitaph say? When all is said and done, what will the sum of the actions you took on Earth be? That is your destination. And when you describe that destination, do so in a simple, compelling way. If you don't get goose bumps when you tell others where you're headed in life then your vision isn't compelling enough to guide and shape your behavior.

When you articulate your personal ethical code and the rules you'll live by, pressure test them. Go back in your personal history to a mistake you made. Ask yourself if your rules of conduct would have prevented that mistake. If the answer is "no" then your personal code of conduct isn't strong enough. Revise it.

When you get done defining your personal end goal and how you'll stay on course, you have something to aim for and guide the path you take in life.

Leading the Thinking.

Once you know where you're headed, you need to let your team know where you're taking them. If you can't define a compelling vision of where you want to take them, they're simply following you out of morbid curiosity just to see what happens. Your role as a leader is to push your team's thinking to new places. You have to generate new ideas. Help them define and achieve a more exciting future.

Not only do you need to define that future vision—you also need to regularly push beyond business as usual. Let your folks know the old "but that's how we've always done it" won't fly anymore. To do that you'll likely have to remind yourself (often) that the status quo simply isn't acceptable. If you can create reminders and use techniques to break you out of that mold you'll increase the likelihood that you'll generate some great new opportunities to pursue.

And once you've identified those opportunities, your job as the leader is to go capture them. You have to make decisions. Stop the analysis paralysis. The notion that you can simply gather more data and be able to make better decisions by doing so is fundamentally flawed. Sure— data matters but don't use it as a crutch or as a way to procrastinate and avoid making a tough call. While the data rolls in and you think you're getting more certainty around the decision you're making, you're simply allowing new sources of uncertainty to enter the equation. You'll

never make the perfect decision so stop trying to do so. Instead make the best decision you can. Figure out a way to force yourself to make a decision as soon as you have enough information (not all the information). Your team is looking for you to be decisive. If you can create a trigger that prods you to make decisions more rapidly, you'll all be better off.

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Leading Your People.

Your task as a leader is to get work done through others. That can happen either through directive or influence. Directives work but they don't build trust or capability as well as influence skills do. In order to influence the members of your team to do what you need done, you must first understand them and their jobs. Once you do, your role is to guide, coach, develop and inspire them.

What do you really know about your team members as individuals? How well do you understand their personal motivations, aspirations, wants, and needs? If you don't know them as individuals how can you expect to lead and inspire them?

Step away from your email, PowerPoint, and spreadsheets and go talk with your people (note I said "with"—not "to"—communication needs to be bi-directional). Understand them inside and out. Once you've done that, create a reminder for yourself to do it on a regular basis. It can be a calendar invite, a picture of your team, a regularly scheduled coffee/lunch, or a goal on your self appraisal. Whatever mechanism you use, maintain consistency around it. Once your people realize and believe you care about them and their well-being they're more likely to feel the same way about you.

Now that you've established mutual respect and made it a habit you have to challenge and develop your people. Again—create reminders and rules for yourself to ensure you deliver hard messages promptly. Set a personal goal for taking risks on your team by putting them in expanded roles so they have an opportunity to grow. Quit protecting your own ass and taking the low-risk route of always having your top performers take the challenging tasks. The rest of the team feels left out and they'll eventually believe you don't trust them. Your job as the leader is to build their skills and capabilities. This by definition means you must assume risk and expand their roles. Do so prudently but do it.

Leading a Balanced Life.

Balance always falls by the wayside. A friend of mine once remarked "someday" is not a day of the week. We always say we'll get balance "someday" but somehow never get around to it. The net result is we run ourselves into the ground and drag our teams down with us. The withering frenzy of long work days and work weeks grinds us down into sullen burned out husks. Why bother working your butt off to secure a great retirement if in doing so you drive yourself to a heart attack before you actually retire?

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We fail at balance because we don't have boundaries. We never set them let alone share them with others. When boundaries don't exist it's impossible to prevent work from intruding on "life" and we have no right getting mad at bosses or coworkers for crossing those boundaries because we never set them explicitly in the first place. Even worse, you're a role model for your team

members. If they see you living without boundaries and they watch your work encroach on every aspect of your life, they'll believe you expect the same of them. Their misery will mirror yours.

Set boundaries. Set them around what's meaningful to you. If attending your kid's sporting events matters, block it on your calendar. If it's using your vacation days, schedule them. Whatever is important to you, you need to define it and share it with others. If you don't you have no right to be mad at people when they cross those boundaries. The good news is once the boundaries are drawn it is much easier to enforce them and regain some sense of balance in your life.

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Share It.

Once you've articulated a personal approach to leadership that is innately your own, share it with others. Let your team know what matters to you, where you're taking them, how you'll interact with them, and what your boundaries are. Give them a foundation for predicting your behavior. That predictability is what trust is based upon.

If you can distill your leadership philosophy to a single page of expectations, standards, and goals—even better. No one wants to read a long, boring philosophy. They'd much rather get to know you as a person. They want to know your personal story and understand your values. The better they know what's important to you, the easier it is for them to meet your standards and expectations. It's also a relief to them to not have to wonder what's on your mind and instead have it handed to them on a simple, straightforward page.

If we want leadership to be authentic again, we need to ditch the lingo, be ourselves, and define our approach to leadership in more ways than simply how we lead our people. **In doing so, it will be easier to live our leadership values every day because it's not too hard to simply be ourselves**

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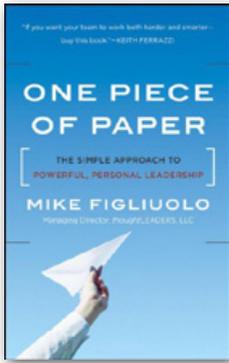
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Mike Figliuolo is the Founder and Managing Director of thoughtLEADERS, LLC—a leadership development and training firm. His book *One Piece of Paper: The Simple Approach to Powerful, Personal Leadership* is designed to help leaders define who they are and what their personal leadership philosophy is. He's an Honor Graduate of West Point and has spent many years in corporate and entrepreneurial roles. You can contact him at info@thoughtleadersllc.com.

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