



LEADERSHIP ON DAY ONE

Drew Dudley

He was straight out of central casting:

tweed blazer, oxford shirt, and tortoise-shell glasses over which he was peering at me with a bemused expression. He looked every bit the part of the fully-tenured professor at a prestigious university.

For the past 20-minutes, he had done a poor job concealing his disinterest as I briefed he and his fellow faculty members on the foundational principles of the university's new leadership development program. When I opened the floor to questions, he jumped in immediately.

“God, Drew, you’re saying we’re going to tell students that every one of them is a leader regardless of their academic performance.”

“Well... exactly professor!” I responded. “The idea is to separate the concept of leadership from accolades and connect it to daily behaviours. Accolades come from external sources, behaviours are controlled personally.”

“Well then,” he scoffed. “I see that we’ve decided to lower the bar on leadership. Let’s make it simple rather than encouraging people to aspire.”

Comments like that drove me to write *This is Day One: A Practical Guide to Leadership that Matters*. I am tired of the perception that words like “simple” and “accessible” are pejoratives when it comes to leadership development or represent a less important form of leadership. I am tired of seeing most of the leadership around me come from people who don’t see themselves as leaders, and I am tired of watching extraordinarily impactful people dismiss the idea they are leaders because they’re young, introverted, or lack titles or impressive paycheques.

I am tired of the idea that striving to be someone who impacts the lives of others positively every day isn't "aspirational."

Over the past decade I have been sharing a leadership approach that aims to meet people where they are in terms of their comfort with leadership, because whether speaking to an audience of custodial staff or a summit full of CEOs, I've seen a lot of discomfort with the concept. I've asked over 1000 audiences around the world "how many of you are comfortable with calling yourself a leader?" and less than 1% of the time have half the people in the room been willing to raise a hand. Even the CEOs, who have been given the title, often don't feel like they are someone who deserves it.

Why would they? Almost every one of them (and every one of us) went through an education system that taught the concept using giants: presidents, scientific ground-breakers, business titans, and people who conquered empires. We don't see ourselves in most of those, and their use as our foundational examples of leadership lead most of us to devalue the leadership we personally demonstrate every day: moments of impact, courage, growth, empowerment, class, and self-respect. We let those moments pass by without recognizing them or allowing ourselves to feel good about them because they pale in comparison to those of the giants we've been taught about. For better or for worse however, the things that make us feel good are the things we are driven to do each day. So, when we allow moments of leadership in our lives to pass by unrecognized and uncelebrated, we make it less likely we will prioritize repeating them. In the process we pull leadership out of our organizations, our communities, and off this planet.

And we need it. I've studied leadership my entire adult life, and I firmly believe there is no shortage of leadership on this planet. However, we are systematically ignoring a huge percentage of the leadership that surrounds us each day because we have chosen to define it too narrowly.

To change that we need to teach a more accessible form of leadership: one that acknowledges that while not everyone can or should be a CEO or senior executive, there is a form of leadership to which we all can and should aspire. My goal is to make living that form of leadership more accessible and appealing (and as such, spread it throughout our organizations and communities) by providing a clear place to start: Day One.

I've had a lot of Day Ones in my life: I've had Day One as an entrepreneur, Day One on a weight-loss voyage of over 100 pounds, and perhaps most formative, Day One of my life without alcohol. I am powerless over alcohol (step one is admitting it), and what I learned in recovery has played a key role in my approach to leadership: if you don't want to have a drink for the rest of your life you have to choose not to have a drink today. Then you must treat every day of the rest of your life as if it was Day One of your recovery.

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Living Day One leadership means embracing the same philosophy: if you want to be a leader, choose to be a leader today. Repeat that choice every day. It doesn't matter if you failed to do it yesterday or if you've done it every day for a decade: every new day begins with a recommitment to that choice. Every single day is Day One—with the accompanying commitment, humility and forgiveness inherent in the first day of anything.

Choosing to be a leader means choosing to make certain positive impactful behaviors non-negotiable each day. Only through disciplined repetition do your key leadership behaviors begin to happen unconsciously. When you no longer must consciously align your behavior with your values—when it happens by instinct—you have created a “personal culture of leadership,” a set of expectations for yourself that become so deeply engrained they begin to control your behavior in a positive way.

I developed the Day One approach to help more people choose the right non-negotiable daily behaviors for themselves. The behaviors are different for every individual but identified and implemented the same way: The Day One approach is a common premise requiring personalized execution.

The Day One process was born when a particularly dynamic student in our leadership program repeated a powerful quote: “It’s a lot easier to stand up for an ideal than it is to live up to one.”

At that moment a social experiment was born. I wanted to create a process that made people (myself included) actually live up to the things for which we claimed to stand. I chose a core group of students to pick one key value and make sure we “walked the walk” by living it each day.

Step one was picking the value. I challenged my students with the following scenario—I encourage you to consider your answer if it were to apply to your family, company, or community:

Imagine I give you the power to choose one value, and one value only. Whichever value you choose, every single person who is a member of this community will do at least one thing each day that embodies that value. It won't be the only value up to which people live, but it will be the only one that's guaranteed.

The students chose “impact,” defining it as “a commitment to creating moments that cause people to feel better off for having interacted with you.”

The experiment was supposed to be simple enough: each student was responsible for doing at least one thing each day that created a moment of impact as we had defined it. They were to stop by my office before they left campus to let me know what they had done. I committed to doing the same thing.

It didn't take long for me to notice something, however: before they'd enter my office to provide their update the students would pause in my outer office for a few moments. I could see them thinking back over their day to identify a moment that satisfied the criteria we had established for impact. Inevitably they found one and reported it to me, but it was clear that they hadn't thought about the assignment all day. Instead, they were looking back and trying spot impact in behavior that had already happened. I have to admit I was doing the same thing. We had hoped this key value of “impact” would drive new behaviors and influence our decisions as we made them. Instead, the only new behavior was an extra stop by my office each day.

We needed a different approach, and it was born from a combination of two psychological phenomena: the Zeigarnik effect and the question-behavior effect (QBE).

The Zeigarnik effect (named for Bluma Zeigarnik, a student of legendary psychologist Kurt Lewin) notes that you're more likely to remember an incomplete or interrupted task than you are a task you've already completed. In other words, things you haven't done assume a more prominent position in your consciousness than those you have.¹

The question-behavior effect (first demonstrated by Jim Sherman at Indiana University) holds that asking people questions about a behavior makes it more likely they will engage in that behavior later on.²

These two psychological effects got me thinking: if an unfinished task was going to be top of mind and questions about desired future behavior could actually cause it to happen, why don't we see if posing a specific question about impact is a more powerful driver of value-consistent behavior than the approach we were taking?

This approach changed everything. We created a question that was carefully crafted so that to answer it you would need to actually do something that would embody our definition of impact: "What have I done today to recognize someone else's leadership?" Our thinking was simple: it was unlikely someone would walk away from an interaction in which they were called a leader without feeling better off for having had that interaction. You couldn't answer the question without creating an impact.

The beautiful thing was the question was extremely broad—there were countless different ways it could be answered. Everyone seeking an answer could define leadership however they chose to do so. It allowed them to recognize others' leadership verbally, in written form, openly or anonymously. Each of us committed to answering the question each day for a week.

1. Zeigarnik, B. (1927). Über das Behalten von erledigten und unerledigten Handlungen. *Psychologische Forschung*, 9, 1-85.

2. Sarah Wilding, Mark Conner, Tracy Sandberg, Andrew Prestwich, Rebecca Lawton, Chantelle Wood, Eleanor Miles, Gaston Godin & Paschal Sheeran (2016) The question-behaviour effect: A theoretical and methodological review and meta-analysis, *European Review of Social Psychology*, 27:1, 196-230, DOI: 10.1080/10463283.2016.1245940

The results were remarkable. When we met a week later, tears flowed as each of us recounted emotional interactions with former teachers, coaches, mentors, parents, even the wildly friendly hot dog vendor on campus. We were using that question to plan moments of impact and to seize them when we saw them because failing to answer it was causing us psychic discomfort as we carried around a key unfinished task.

That question did not change who we were or what we valued, but it did make us far more aware of how many unrecognized leaders surrounded us, and how many opportunities for impact we were presented with each day. More importantly, it made us far less likely to allow those opportunities to pass by without acting on them. It began to align what we claimed to stand for with how we were behaving.

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This three-step process (which we named “operationalizing leadership values”) is the foundation of the Day One Leadership approach:

1. **Identify the key values you wish to stand for** (these need to be surfaced through specific reflective activities).
2. **Clearly define each value** using the phrase “<VALUE> is a commitment to...”, as that phrase is almost always followed by a verb—an actual behaviour.
3. **Create a question that will drive behaviour consistent with that value.**

As I’ve developed and moved through the process, six values I hope define me—and accompanying questions designed to ensure that they do—have emerged:

Impact: What have I done today to recognize someone else’s leadership?

Courage: What have I tried today that I thought might not work, but I tried it anyway?

Growth: What did I do today to make it more likely someone would learn something?

Empowerment: What have I done today to make it more likely someone else will reach a goal?

Class: How did I elevate instead of escalate today?

Self-respect: What did I do today to be good to myself?

These questions ensure my values influence my decisions and behaviour throughout the day. These action-driving questions are an essential part of a daily commitment to leadership for three key reasons:

1. **They demand specificity**—they cannot be answered yes or no, but demand you are specific in the what, when, and how you engaged in certain behaviours.
2. **They draw on psychological research** that leverages unconscious drivers of human behaviour, supporting your conscious efforts to deliver on your personal leadership commitments.
3. **They allow for a daily assessment of your personal leadership**—a daily “leadership test” that speaks to your success at aligning your key leadership values with your behaviour.

Each person who moves through the process identifies their own values and creates their own questions that comprise their unique “leadership test” they must pass at the end of each day: you conceive of each day as Day One on your leadership journey, but each new Day One must be earned by answering at least half of your questions each day. Doing so gives you hard evidence you lived your core leadership values each day, even if everything else in your life and career blew up in your face.

My six questions continue to drive my life and my company. With a phone and laptop, I can answer all six faster than I can empty my email inbox each day. For years, however, I prioritized answering my email over deliberately planning to live the values I cared about the most: my leadership was scattershot and unconscious, not planned and deliberate. The Day One leadership process changed that.

The questions created by the Day One approach are about setting expectations for yourself: if you don't make clear what you expect from yourself and consistently demonstrate behavior that lives up to those expectations, no one cares what you expect from them and no one is going to deliver it. The creation, sharing, and the disciplined execution of these questions takes leadership from theory to execution. It makes core values more than words you use but cannot define, let alone consistently act upon. It drives action.

Some are initially dismissive of the simplicity of this approach, but simple doesn't mean easy. It's not unusual for high-performers to assume they've already moved beyond what it teaches... until they actually try it. That's when they realize they haven't moved beyond its principles—they've skipped over them. The approach focuses on the foundational building blocks of personal leadership, so it's not glitzy. It's the miles of running in the rain before the marathon, or the hours in the gym before stepping into the ring. It is unglamorous, but essential. And the more committed you are to reinforcing the foundations of your personal leadership each day, the more you raise your capacity for high performance.

If you don't make clear what you expect from yourself and consistently demonstrate behavior that lives up to those expectations, no one cares what you expect from them and no one is going to deliver it.

So, let me be clear: you can be incredibly accomplished without doing this. You can be wildly talented without doing this. You can be intellectually brilliant, remarkably driven, tremendously well compensated, and widely respected without doing this; but you cannot reach your full capacity for leading yourself or a team of people to peak performance without consistently stating and living up to a clear set of personal leadership values. Research has shown that personal value clarity is linked to improved pride, performance, commitment, and satisfaction—and identifying our core values and the values of those we lead is an underutilized tool in our quest to be our best selves and to bring out the best in others.

Leaders should embrace the idea that who you want to be each day should be prioritized over what you have to do. You must be willing to identify and commit to specific personal leadership behaviors that are non-negotiable each day, that cannot be put aside in the name of your to-do list. It's not an either/or situation, however: a significant tenet of this approach is identifying how you can engage in those behaviors through your work, so it doesn't involve compromising your commitment to your career.

People who have worked 90 hours per week and sacrificed their relationships for a corner office or dropped 150-grand on a degree sometimes see a broader definition of leadership as inferring "you're not so special after all," and push back. I'm not trying to devalue traditional definitions of leadership or tell anyone who has worked hard to get ahead or set themselves apart that they are any less impressive or deserving of what they've achieved. What I am arguing is that there is a form of leadership to which everyone can and should aspire, and that the majority of people in our organizations minimize their potential impact on the organization and their colleagues. At the same time, many people who occupy C-Suites can't define their core leadership values or identify a single act they undertook today to live up to those values.

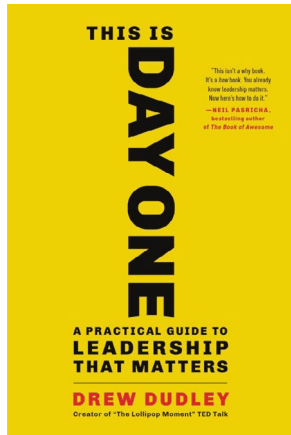
When we reframe leadership as being evaluated on a daily basis—determined solely by how any one person is behaving today, not what they've accomplished over time—we reinforce the idea that everyone starts at the same place each day, with an obligation (and the ability) to positively impact the people, organizations, and communities around them.

Leadership is a daily choice: a choice everyone can make, starting today, on Day One. 📖





Info



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About the author

Drew Dudley's TEDx talk "Everyday Leadership" has been viewed close to five million times and praised by *Time*, *Business Insider*, and *Inc.* magazine. Dudley is the founder of Day One Leadership, where he works with individuals and organizations around the world to unlock their leadership potential.

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