1

Welcome to the Work of Leaders

Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.
—WARREN BENNIS

Across from our Minneapolis office is a restaurant called The Super Moon Buffet. The word "super," however, is an almost coquettish understatement. *It is massive*. The theme is technically Chinese, but the ambition here goes way beyond what any single country could dream up. They've got sushi, French fries, ham, fresh fruit, roast duck, dim sum, apple pie, barbecued spare ribs, stir-fried frog legs, baby octopus, pork chitterlings. It's overwhelming. Each person has to come to

terms with the Super Moon in his or her own way. Some people avoid paralysis by simply diving into the first dish that strikes them. Some rely on advanced mapping software. When we take out-of-towners there for lunch, they walk out the door and ask, "What just happened?"

This experience is not completely unlike sorting through the selection of leadership books on Amazon. *It is massive*, but not necessarily in a bad way. Just like the buffet, of course, there's some junk in there. (What is a chitterling anyway?) But mostly there are really brilliant, helpful, and practical insights. People who've spent a lifetime leading or studying leadership are willing to share their wisdom with the rest of us. The problem, however, is organizing and making sense out of all this information. To say the least, it's overwhelming.

We work for a company that's in the learning business. It's our job to make sure that people not only have access to information, but that they can actually absorb it. So we had a major task ahead of us when we set out to develop our own leadership training program about six years ago—make this wealth of leadership insight accessible to all kinds of people in all kinds of organizations. The key word here is "accessible."

Now, we know that people *want* to access this information, and we're not just talking about the people at the top. We asked more than 5,900 training participants in which skill areas they would voluntarily spend their time attending training. Table 1.1 shows the top five results.

Not surprisingly, people are most willing to attend training that has direct, concrete applications in their world—"technical knowledge related to my job." It's good to know how to do your job. But look at what's a close second with 81 percent: "Leadership skills." In fact, when we asked people what training would greatly increase their effectiveness

Table 1.1. Interest by Type of Training Program

Skill	Percent Who Would Attend the Training
Technical knowledge related to my job	86
Leadership skills	81
Innovative thinking skills	76
Management skills	76
Dealing with conflict or difficult people	74

at work, the number one answer, by far, was also leadership skills. More than half of the workers in our sample said they've read one or more leadership books in the past two years. Managers are more interested in attending leadership training than management training. People feel that there's a lot to learn—and there is.

But again, this information has to be *accessible* if it's going to make a real difference in anyone's work. So that's what we set out to do—make leadership accessible. In essence, our goal was to study all of the most respected thinking and research on leadership, focusing on common themes and major breakthroughs, and follow up with our own research, gaining clarification on the most promising ideas.

The first stage, our literature review, was, frankly, exhausting. Over the course of about five years, we worked with a team of people finding the best thinking on leadership. Now, it turns out that finding the best thinking also means reading a lot of the less-than-best thinking. But that's okay; nobody got hurt.

We also realized that if we wanted to come up with a truly comprehensive view of leadership, we would have to include writers from a broad range of perspectives:

Contemporary authors like Marcus Buckingham and Seth Godin	and	Classic authors like Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis
Authors who come from an academic background like Peter Senge and Daniel Goleman	and	Authors who come from a consulting background like Liz Wiseman and Patrick Lencioni
Leaders who have thrived in the non-profit sector like Frances Hesselbein and Gloria Duffy	and	Leaders who have thrived in the corporate world like Larry Bossidy and Harry Jensen Kraemer, Jr.
Authors who come from a highly philosophical perspective like John Maxwell and Max De Pree	and	Authors who come from a highly research-based perspective like Jim Collins and Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner

The goal was to pull out a simple structure that still captured the richness within all of this thinking. That is, what are the biggest, most important ideas?

Then we moved on to verify and build on what we had learned. We wanted clarification on these big, important ideas. How do they hold up under scrutiny? How do they apply to the work leaders do on a daily basis? As it turns out, we were in a highly enviable position to take on this sort of inquiry. We work for an organization that, among other things, helps

hundreds of thousands of managers and leaders every year understand the relationship between their personalities and their work. We have as many as 3,500 people *a day* completing one of our online assessments, many of whom are gracious enough to help us out with our leadership research.

As a result, we can study the attitudes and behaviors of literally thousands of leaders every week. Collecting data of this magnitude usually takes months. Extensive resources are needed. Undergraduate psychology majors can be locked in rooms for weeks until they tabulate piles of surveys. Our setup, on the other hand, gave us the opportunity to quickly test hypotheses, look at the results, then test some more. We could pit grand theories and conventional wisdom against the real work that leaders do, every day. Ultimately, the VAE model in this book was created in ten stages of development, as shown in Table 1.2. You can read in more depth about this process and our research in Appendix A. And so we're happy to say that, throughout this book, we are able to provide you with the results from dozens of studies that we have conducted over the past five years with hundreds of thousands of participants. Given all of this information, however, we were sure not to lose sight of our end goal—to create a framework of leadership that was accessible and actionable for *everyone*—not just the CEOs or the Ph.D.s. We wanted to take the mystery out of leadership and spell out a leader's responsibilities as clearly as possible. The result was a leadership model of Vision, Alignment, and Execution—what we call the VAE model.

The VAE Model

In our view, leaders have three fundamental responsibilities: They craft a *vision,* they build *alignment,* and they champion *execution.* Of course, there's a lot of skill that

Table 1.2. Development of the VAE Model

	Stage	Description
FOUNDATION	1	*Leadership Literature Review:* We studied the works of 55 recognized thought leaders in the leadership field and identified major themes and patterns.
	2	*Personality Based Leadership Research:* We collected data to understand the influence of personality on leadership.
	3	*Analysis of 360-Degree Leadership Data:* We analyzed data from 360 raters to find the most important contributions and costly mistakes of leaders.
	4	*Survey of Training Industry:* In nine different studies, we surveyed learners in the training industry about their training experiences.
DEVELOPMENT	5	*Leadership Model Prototypes:* We created prototypes of the VAE model that provided a framework to test for both accuracy and resonance.
	6	*Subject-Matter Expert (SME) Reviews:* We approached hundreds of consultants, coaches, and corporate trainers for feedback on the model.
	7	*Classroom Testing:* We evaluated the experiences of thousands of learners who went through classroom training using the VAE model.
REFINEMENT	8	*Quantitative and Qualitative Feedback:* We augmented the research with online surveys and in-depth interviews of classroom facilitators.
	9	*Literature Review Update:* We revisited a wider range of social science research to understand leadership challenges from a broader perspective.
	10	*Supplemental Research:* We conducted dozens of studies to understand the VAE model on an applied, more granular level.

goes into each of these responsibilities. That, in fact, is what the rest of this book is about.

But, if you're the kind of person who absolutely insists on knowing what you're getting yourself into, here are some quick definitions.

- **Crafting a Vision:** imagining an improved future state that the group will make a reality through its work
- **Building Alignment:** getting to the point where everyone in the group understands and is committed to the direction
- **Championing Execution:** ensuring that the conditions are present for the imagined future to be turned into a reality

All three are part of a dynamic, fluid process. While there is a loose order implied in the VAE model, the actual Work of Leaders is not strictly sequential. Although it makes sense to craft a vision before aligning around it and executing on it, leaders are continually revisiting and reshaping their visions of the future. Likewise, we need to have buy-in before any major push toward execution, but maintaining alignment is an ongoing process.

There is, obviously, a great deal of complexity in doing the work of a leader, but the true value of this model is that it lays out a manageable, realistic framework to guide the process. The goal is to provide straightforward explanations of where you might choose to target your personal development efforts.

How This Book Is Organized

Accessibility is our overriding vision for this book. Therefore, the outline is pretty straightforward. Each of the

three sections (Vision, Alignment, and Execution) has its own introduction followed by three drivers and a summary. A "driver" is a foundational element that lays the groundwork for each step of the process and makes it achievable. Within each of the drivers, you'll find two best practices, or specific behaviors that support the driver. So, for instance, the three drivers of Crafting a Vision are Exploration, Boldness, and Testing Assumptions. The two best practices of Exploration are Remaining Open and Prioritizing the Big Picture. Figure 1.1 shows the grand map.

You'll probably find that some of these drivers are second-nature to you. You'll have a hard time believing that someone could lead any other way. But as we see in every VAE training session, there are also some drivers that may be much more difficult. Everybody has at least a few areas where their initial reaction is, "You know what? That's just not my thing. What's the next one?" Ironically, those are the chapters that may help you the most. And that's why we've included "strategies for development" for each driver.

You certainly don't need to be a master in all of these areas, but our research suggests that, to be an effective leader, some level of skill in all drivers is a must. In the end, leadership development, like any personal development, is about energy. *Where* do you put your energy and *how much* do you put in? This book is about *where* to put your energy. You decide *how much*.
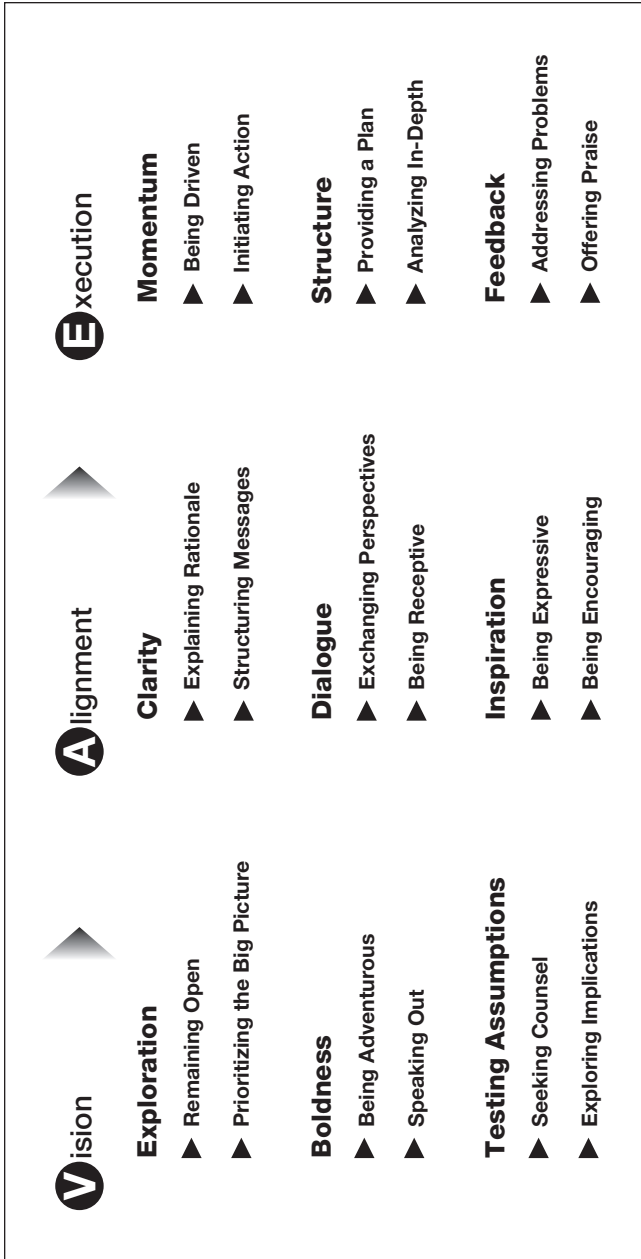
Vision

Exploration
▲ Remaining Open
▲ Prioritizing the Big Picture

Boldness
▲ Being Adventurous
▲ Speaking Out

Testing Assumptions
▲ Seeking Counsel
▲ Exploring Implications

Alignment

Clarity
▲ Explaining Rationale
▲ Structuring Messages

Dialogue
▲ Exchanging Perspectives
▲ Being Receptive

Inspiration
▲ Being Expressive
▲ Being Encouraging

Execution

Momentum
▲ Being Driven
▲ Initiating Action

Structure
▲ Providing a Plan
▲ Analyzing In-Depth

Feedback
▲ Addressing Problems
▲ Offering Praise

Figure 1.1. The Work of Leaders Overview

Cornerstone Principles of the Work of Leaders

- The VAE model approaches leadership as a one-to-many relationship, as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of management.

- The Work of Leaders is done by leaders at all levels. Whether you are a senior executive or a leader on the front line, the process of leadership follows the same path.

- The Work of Leaders is a collaborative process, but the journey to becoming an effective leader is a personal one. Some of the skills and best practices outlined here may come to you more easily than others.