

A Radically Simple Leadership Approach  
to Lift People, Profits, and Performance



“The message is insightful—if you  
aren’t opening doors for your  
people, you are closing them!”

—MARSHALL GOLDSMITH,  
*bestselling author, MOJO*

SECOND EDITION

# leaders & open doors

BILL TREASURER

BESTSELLING LEADERSHIP TRAINING BOOK

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# Preface

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My five-year-old son Ian is a preschooler at the Asheville Montessori School in Asheville, North Carolina. Each Monday his teachers pick one person to be the “class leader” for the day. I only became aware of this because one sunny afternoon Ian came bounding up the stairs proclaiming, “Guess what, Daddy—I got to be the class leader today!”

Being the class leader would be a big deal for any five-year-old kid. For Ian, who is used to playing second fiddle to his older twin brother and sister, Alex and Bina, being selected as the first fiddle was even more special. Ian’s exuberance caught my attention.

“Really? Class leader? That’s a big deal, little buddy. What did you get to do as the class leader?”

Ian’s answer was simple, funny, and in its own way, profound.

“I got to open doors for people!”

In a matter of 15 seconds, with seven simple words, Ian clarified what’s most important about leadership.

## How Leaders Serve Up Opportunities

I'm one of those people who can get all knotted up by overthinking simple ideas. I love it when wise people like my five-year-old son can cut straight to what matters most. Ian is right: to be a leader is to open doors for others. Leaders open doors of perception, possibility, and most importantly, opportunity. This book is about how leaders help people and organizations by creating opportunities for growth. It is about the responsibility that leaders have for noticing, identifying, and creating opportunities for the benefit of people, organizations, and society. I call it open-door leadership.

## We Complexify Leadership

In his role as class leader, Ian quickly learned an essential lesson about leadership. Opening doors is pretty much what matters most about leading people. Yet leadership, as a topic, has become increasingly complex and overwhelming. It is the most overanalyzed, thoroughly dissected, and utterly confused topic in business. In addition to umpteen thousands of books on the subject, there are leadership blogs, seminars, webinars, and retreats, all peddled by leadership gurus and consultants. I know. I am one of them.

For more than half my life, I have studied leadership. I began because in one of my earlier jobs I discovered that I was a lousy leader. One of my employees told me so . . . after threatening to quit because of my dictatorial behavior. But more on that later.

After discovering how pathetically bad I was as a leader, I started reading books on leadership and management. I got better as a leader. As a result, I decided to go to graduate school and I did my thesis on leadership.

And that's when it started. That's when I became an official contributor to the complexification of leadership. My thesis assessed—take a deep breath—*the efficacy of the initiation of psychological structure through the use of directive leadership styles as a negative correlate of role ambiguity and positive correlate of employee satisfaction in workplaces that have undergone a recent reduction in force.*

Whew!

Since graduate school two decades ago, my contributions to the complexification of leadership have only gotten more pronounced. I worked for two small leadership and team-building companies. Later, I was an executive in the change management and human performance practice at Accenture, one of the world's largest consulting firms. I eventually became the company's first full-time internal executive coach. Building on those experiences, in 2002 I founded my own management consulting company (Giant Leap Consulting) and have since designed, developed, and delivered leadership workshops for thousands of employees in prominent organizations throughout the world. I've authored a comprehensive off-the-shelf leadership-facilitator training program and two not-so-simple books.

I became a senior officer in the legion of consultants who make their livelihood by plumbing, parsing, and peddling

leadership. I can complexify with the best of them. The more my consulting compatriots and I complexify leadership by using fancy-pants words and nitpicking the life out of the subject, the more we can charge you for our specialized leadership hocus-pocus. Sure, most of us are well intentioned, but by overanalyzing the subject, we've muddled up the concept of leadership.

We leadership experts, sadly, have made it harder for people to be leaders. As the checklist for what it takes to be a leader gets longer, more idealized, and more complicated, the expectations that we hold leaders to keep shifting, causing people to opt out of the chance to lead. The standards of what it means to be a leader have been raised beyond people's reach. The expectations that leaders are held to have become so inflated that practically no one can categorically qualify as a "leader" anymore. We expect leaders to be bold *and* calculated, passionate *and* reasonable, rational *and* emotional, confident *and* humble, driven *and* patient, strategic *and* tactical, competitive *and* cooperative, principled *and* flexible. Of course, it is possible to be all of those things . . . if you're God!

## **I Resign From the Legion of Leadership Complexifiers**

This book represents my full resignation from the ranks of the Legion of Leadership Complexifiers (LLC). I pledge to you that I will speak plainly and simply. Too many books,

including my earlier ones, are too dense and bloated with big SAT words, fancy quadrant models, and research citations from obscure academic journals. It's all part of the complexification business. But after a quarter of a century as a ranking member of the LLC, this complexification stuff bores and exhausts me. The density weighs me down. I suspect it weighs you down too. Reading a book shouldn't exhaust you like a long day at work.

My resignation is driven by a few changes in my own life. First, I'm older and, frankly, less insecure. When I was in my 20s, 30s, and 40s, proving how smart I was took up a lot of my time. Now that I'm in my 50s, I am more interested in having ideas connect with you than validating my intellect.

Second, having led hundreds of client engagements throughout my career and having spoken to thousands of people across the world, I've come to realize that the ideas that get through to people are those that are easiest to understand. Simple ideas are self-evident and effective. Most importantly, simple ideas get used.

The third change driving my resignation from the LLC ranks is that I'm the father of three children. They have taught me that we career-minded grown-ups are often just too smart for our own good, which is dumb. We're better off thinking about leadership with the clarity and simplicity of a five-year-old child. When I want my kids to get something done, like a house chore, I don't talk about the "strategic value-added proposition of goal attainment"; I talk about the opportunity they'll create by getting the work

done. *Yes*, kids, you *can* have ice cream . . . right after you clean up your room. Simple, not complex!

## **We Can Simplify Leadership**

Faced with a growing and ever-changing list of leadership criteria, who could possibly be successful as a leader, much less want to be one? Maybe it's time to lighten the leadership load a little. Maybe it's time to get back to the basic idea that leaders are simply creators of opportunity for others: they open doors. I wrote this book to bring leadership back to that simple idea.

Open-door leadership is a simple concept that you can quickly grasp and enjoy putting into practice. My hope is that the concepts make it appealing for you to opt in to the chance to lead. If you are in a position to open doors for people by creating opportunities that help them grow, you are a leader. This book will be especially useful if you are:

- new to the leadership ranks
- a seasoned executive, but feeling uninspired in your leadership role
- frustrated by the apathy and lack of motivation shown by your direct reports
- at the “give back” stage in your career, where helping others succeed is especially gratifying
- confused about the topic of leadership (maybe because of the glut of bloated leadership books!)
- wanting to be a better and more effective leader.

The aim of this book is simple: to inspire you to open doors of opportunity for the people you lead.

## How This Book Opens Doors for You

As you read *Leaders Open Doors* you will be introduced to six unique doors of opportunity. The book is divided into two parts: “Before the Door” and “Doors of Opportunity.” The first three chapters, part I, will ground you in the book’s foundational concepts; part II covers six chapters, each describing a unique opportunity door. *Leaders Open Doors* is meant to be a fast and useful read. It is also designed to help you take immediate action. At the end of each chapter you’ll be provided with some specific actions and reflection questions to provide momentum toward strengthening your open-door leadership.

Chapter	You’ll Learn	Key Takeaways
Preface	What a leader is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Leadership should be simple, not complex.</li> <li>❖ A leader creates opportunities for others.</li> </ul>
Chapter 1: Introducing Open-Door Leadership	Why leadership means opening doors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Open-door leaders have four key skills.</li> </ul>
Chapter 2: Opportunity Focus	Why focusing on problem solving is far less effective than focusing on the opportunities those “problems” nearly always provide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Leaders fill people with courage.</li> <li>❖ Pull through opportunity; don’t push through fear.</li> <li>❖ Sharpen your own opportunity-focus.</li> </ul>

Chapter	You'll Learn	Key Takeaways
Chapter 3: Purposeful Discomfort	Why making people uncomfortable—in a way they can absorb—is every leader's primary job	❖ Create discomfort for both yourself and others to inspire them to grow.
Chapter 4: The Proving-Ground Door	Why giving people opportunities to prove themselves taps into their need to excel and can supercharge motivation	❖ Design gradual proving-ground opportunities to help people grow. ❖ Refine your own skills as an open-door leader.
Chapter 5: The Thought-Shifting Door	How the actions leaders take can help broaden and shift someone's perspective so he can face challenges more creatively	❖ Disrupting mental routines encourages creativity. ❖ Symbols encourage thought shift. ❖ Small language changes can change perception.
Chapter 6: The Door to a Second Chance	How you can gain deep loyalty and commitment when you open a door to a second chance, especially after big mistakes	❖ Transform mistakes into platforms for growth. ❖ Strategic forgiveness can engender loyalty and growth.
Chapter 7: Opening Doors for Others	Why leaders need to pay special attention to the needs of people who are outside the majority	❖ Break through "tribal" thinking and include Others in your organization.

Chapter	You'll Learn	Key Takeaways
Chapter 8: The Door to Personal Transformation	How instrumental leaders can be in bringing about career and life transformations for people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Leaders should model transformation first.</li> <li>❖ Open-door leaders intentionally help others transform.</li> <li>❖ Open-door leaders promote accountability.</li> <li>❖ Effective feedback is both diplomatic and honest.</li> </ul>
Chapter 9: The Door to Your Open Heart	How you can have the greatest positive impact on people only when you open yourself up and show your true self to those you lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Caring affects loyalty and performance.</li> <li>❖ Opening up about who you really are can strengthen your bond with those you lead—and why you should do it.</li> </ul>

## A Word Before You Start

The approach to leadership described in this book is based on the simple and well-tested idea that leaders help people and organizations grow when they focus on creating opportunities for others. But just because the idea is simple doesn't mean it is easy. Open-door leadership takes work. So let's get started. How do you start opening doors for people, and what's in it for you if you do? Turn to the first part to find out.



# Part I

## Before the Door

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Being an open-door leader requires understanding what an open-door leader does. It also means having an opportunity mind-set, a significant shift from the more common threat-focused way of leading. Many leaders hyperfocus on mitigating risk, viewing most situations as threats or problems. But when leaders view situations as risks, threats, or problems, they inject fear and anxiety into people, generating pessimism. In the long run, fear damages morale and performance.

Open-door leaders view challenging situations as opportunities, not problems. Instead of injecting people with fear, they help people see the opportunities that the challenges provide, inspiring them with excitement and hope. The resulting optimism lifts morale and performance.

In this part you'll discover:

- the four skills of an open-door leader
- why your approach to opportunity matters

## Part I

- why using fear to motivate people makes for lousy leadership
- why making people uncomfortable is one of an open-door leader's most important jobs.

# Chapter 1

## Introducing Open-Door Leadership

*All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual.*

—**Albert Einstein**

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Leadership is often defined as a set of behaviors by which one person influences others toward the achievement of goals. Put more simply, leadership is about momentum and results. While these definitions are true, they somehow fall short. What mechanism should a leader use, for example, to “influence” strong performance? Has leadership evolved beyond carrots and sticks? And what about the people being led? Besides a paycheck, what do they get out of getting results for the leader? What’s in it for them? After all, the leader’s success depends on them, right?

What’s missing is *opportunity*. In exchange for advancing the leader’s goals, the people being led should expect work opportunities that provide for:

- growth and personal development
- career fulfillment and enrichment
- acquisition of new skills
- financial gain and other rewards
- greater access to leadership roles.

People and organizations grow and develop to the extent that they capitalize on opportunities to do so. Opportunities are important to leaders because they're important to the people they lead. Opportunities are the venues where people can try, test, better, and even find themselves. The leader's job is to match the opportunity to the person and to help the person—and the organization—exploit that opportunity for all it's worth. Open-door leadership is about noticing, identifying, and creating opportunities for those being led.

Think for a moment about a leader you greatly admire. Pick someone who has led you, rather than someone on the world stage. What do you admire about him or her? Did he open a door to an opportunity where you could grow your skills or improve yourself, such as asking you to lead a high-profile project? Did she help illuminate a blind spot by giving you candid feedback that caused you to see yourself in a different and more honest way? Did he build your confidence by asking for your perspective, input, and ideas? Or did she openly advocate for your promotion, showing you how much she valued you? What doors did he open for you?

My bet is that the leaders you most admire are the ones who left you better off than they found you by creating opportunities that helped you grow. How?

- by being open *to* you, valuing your input and perspective
- by being open *with* you, telling you the truth even if the truth is difficult to hear
- by helping you be receptive to new possibilities and experiences and new ways of perceiving and thinking.

Open-door leadership involves creating or assigning opportunities in order to promote growth. By promoting the growth of those they lead, leaders increase the likelihood of their own success and advancement. They also increase the likelihood of creating other leaders, which is essential to building a lasting leadership legacy. Leaders create leaders by opening doors of opportunity that have a positive and lasting impact on the behavior of those they lead.

## **“Open Door” Is Not a Policy!**

To be clear, open-door leadership is not about having an open-door policy. Such policies are just more management hokum. One of the surest signs of a rookie leader is the claim, “I have an open-door policy, and my door is always open so my employees can get to me.” Allowing yourself to be continuously interrupted is a recipe for lousy leadership. If your door is always open, how on earth can you get any work done on behalf of the people who are interrupting

you? Open-door leadership is not about having a policy of keeping your door open *to* others. It's about taking actions to open doors *for* others. It is about so much more than giving people unfettered access to you.

## I Knew an Open-Door Leader

After having spoken with thousands of executives over the course of two decades, I am convinced that career advancement is nearly always a function of the presence, influence, and support of a dedicated open-door leader. They always seem to appear when we need them, nudging us along, encouraging our growth, and helping us see and move toward our potential.

Let me share a very personal story about one such leader's profound impact on my life and career. The story helps illustrate the concept of open-door leadership and introduces the four skills that open-door leaders possess.



I used to drink too much. Way too much. I drank to the point where my drinking started interfering with my life and relationships. Eventually I entered a recovery program and got help. Life got better.

Three years after getting sober and attending lots of support group meetings, I decided to reveal to my boss, Hines Brannan, a partner at Accenture, that I was in recovery. After working for him for three years, I wanted him to know me beyond the person he knew me to be at work.

Keep in mind that Accenture is not some young, urban start-up company with a foosball table in the break room. It is one of the world's largest management and technology consulting firms. The culture is, at once, professional, disciplined, ambitious, and . . . stiff. While I didn't expect my boss to pat me on my shoulder and say, "Good for you. You're a drunk!" I expected more of a reaction than I got. After I told him that I was in recovery, Hines looked at me quizzically, and muttered, "I see." Then he made some small-talk comments and hurried on to another meeting.

I regretted having told him and wondered whether I had just damaged my career.

Then, about two weeks later, Hines called me into his office and said, "I've been thinking about what you told me a few weeks ago. What I didn't tell you then is that I am the chairman of the board of directors of a nonprofit agency called the Georgia Council on Substance Abuse. It's based here in Atlanta. Accenture recently agreed to do a pro bono research project, and we're going to be providing them with a small team to do the research. I'd like for you to lead the project. Remember, I'm the board chair, so I'm going to be here with you every step of the way."

Door open.



My boss had created an opportunity for me to align my career goals and my personal interests with Accenture's goals in serving the client.

It was the first time as a new manager that I got to lead my own project team. Given my personal experience with substance abuse, you can imagine how much passion I had for the work. With that passion, and the support of my boss, I did a great job. Because I did a great job, new doors opened and I got other meaningful projects.

There are a number of factors at play in this story. First, to open a door for me, Hines had to have a fuller knowledge of my background than just my current skills. He had to know what I wanted to achieve with my career and the contribution I was hoping to make. He also had to know something about my outside-of-work identity. Second, he had to make the connection between an opportunity that existed and my *suiteness* to take advantage of it. Third, he had to have a clear vision about how the opportunity could benefit the company and me. The opportunity would need to deepen my experience and increase my skills, making me a more valuable employee. Fourth, he had to have a genuine interest in seeing me succeed. In short, he had to care about me.

Using this story as an example, we can draw out the four skills that open-door leaders commonly apply. You need to:

- **Know your employees:** Have extensive knowledge about the backgrounds, needs, and desires of your employees. Invest time in getting to know them beyond the tasks they get done for you. Ask them directly about their career goals and aspirations—what do they want to get out of this job? Keep in mind the goal isn't to intrude or interrogate. It's to gain

insight into their goals, strengths, and motivations. We'll talk more about this in the coming chapters.

- **Match suitedness:** Draw connections between the opportunity and the developmental needs of your employees. This involves constantly being on the lookout for opportunities that can advance your employee's career. Then, when opportunities are identified ask yourself, "Whose growth and development would pursuing this opportunity most advance?"
- **Envision the desired results:** Have a clear picture of the desired benefits that given opportunities present for the employees and the organization. Once an opportunity is assigned, do some "future-casting" with your employee, thinking through the potential benefits—to the employee and the organization—that could emerge if the opportunity is successfully accomplished. Also give some thought to the actions that will have to occur to maximize the probability of success.
- **Provide ongoing support:** Genuinely want, and support, your employees' success. This skill is an outgrowth of the other three. When you really know the aims of your employees—when you've assigned them to a juicy opportunity that's ripe for their skills and worked with them to develop a clear picture of a successful outcome—you almost can't help but take a strong interest in their success. Stay involved by periodically asking what support they need from you, removing barriers that might block their progress, and offering encouragement and guidance when they hit roadblocks and bottlenecks.

The more you cultivate these skills, the more you will see opportunities to open doors for others. The starting place is a strong opportunity focus, which is the subject of the next chapter.

## Open-Door Actions and Reflections

1. Think back over the course of your career.
  - What are some opportunities that have been given to you?
2. How have those opportunities helped you grow personally and professionally?
  - Which opportunity stands out as particularly important?
  - Who brought the opportunity to you?
  - What is your impression of him or her as a leader?
  - Why do you think you were selected for the opportunity instead of someone else?
3. Look over the four skills of an open-door leader.
  - Which ones did the person who brought you the opportunity use?
  - Based on what you've read so far about open-door leadership, was the person who brought you the opportunity an open-door leader?