MORE PRAISE FOR

PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS

“A perfect read to support leaders for peak performance in disruptive times. Skills and theory are not enough! Let’s build leaders to be agile and fit to make our organizations survive and soar.”

—Elliott Masie
Chair, The Learning CONSORTIUM

“If you are overwhelmed with the number of leadership books available and want one that will provide the best overview of what it really takes to be a great leader, start here. Peak Leadership Fitness is the perfect guide for first-time leaders, or anyone who wants to perfect their leadership skill set.”

—Beverly Kaye
Co-Author, Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go

“The effort it takes to reach peak leadership fitness and peak physical fitness is amazingly similar. Both require you to set goals, persevere, work with a team, and follow a game plan. Peak Leadership Fitness spells out that plan for you and gets you to your peak!”

—Dan Jansen
Olympic Gold Medalist, Speed Skating

“Committing to your leadership development seems daunting and time consuming, but it is critically important to the success of your organization, especially the people on your team. Thinking about a leadership development plan like a fitness plan makes total sense, and Peak Leadership Fitness is a must-read to help guide you through the process.”

—Joe Del Guercio
President and CEO, A. James and Alice B. Clark Foundation
“Peak Leadership Fitness demonstrates how much endurance sport and leadership have in common and provides you with a practical how-to guide to help you take control of your leadership development.”

—Rocky Harris
CEO, USA Triathlon

“Anyone who helps develop leaders, employees, and teams will revere this book, which provides unique insights and practical approaches for elevating productivity and performance. We owe it to ourselves and our companies to be peak leaders, and Tobin teaches us how with a valuable set of useful tools and resources. We’ve got this!”

—Tamar Elkeles
Chief Talent Executive, Atlantic Bridge Capital

“Peak Leadership Fitness is the perfect combination of great leadership science and business-relevant wisdom. Tim has inspired me to approach my career and personal development in a whole new way.”

—Walt McFarland
Co-Author, Choosing Change

“Like athletes, leaders must constantly work at being fit—getting feedback, building their core, and jumping into challenging situations. Tobin says leadership requires an athlete’s dedication and commitment to ongoing personal transformation. Successful leaders—the kind who get results and create great workplaces—will agree.”

—Pat McLagan
Author, Unstoppable You

“Tim Tobin has brought together two areas that require a deep commitment to growth and development. This book perfectly blends the discipline needed to become a better leader while maintaining your physical edge. Everyone will find this book to be a powerful motivator!”

—Steve Arneson, PhD
President, Arneson Leadership Consulting
PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS
Elevating Your Leadership Game
TIMOTHY J. TOBIN
Both leadership and fitness are a journey into self-discovery.
Enjoy the journey and remember...anything is possible!
Introduction

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Growing up, I was pretty active. I participated in a wide variety of sports—some formal, as part of a team, and others more casually. I never excelled at any one sport, but I could hold my own in many of them. Outside of team practices, I never really trained for anything. I always gave effort, but I didn’t have focus. It’s safe to say that in my youth I took fitness for granted. I had a solid foundation of capability and fitness, but did not develop good, sustainable habits. That would eventually come back to haunt me, but my response would come to define me.

Flash forward to my late 20s, and my fitness as I once knew it was gone. I had gained weight and lost stamina. It seemed as if my fitness had disappeared in the blink of an eye, but it was really the result of years of neglect. I had gotten sidetracked by life: Education. Career. Friends.

When I was 29, my friend Cady suggested that a group of us run a 10K race together. Many years prior, the thought of running 6.2 miles would have been no problem. But things had changed. I had changed. Not wanting to turn down the opportunity, I signed up and began to train. I found running six blocks a challenge, let alone six-plus miles, but I was determined to run the race.

I still remember race day. It was a crisp December morning with gray skies. It was a themed run, and many participants were dressed as elves, reindeer, presents, or Santa. Not me. I’m not much of a costume person on a normal day, much less when I am trying to run a race.
At the starting line, I was completely dialed in to the task ahead. I heard the starting gun go off and shuffled forward with all the other runners. Off we went. Less than halfway through the race, however, I realized there was a problem and told my friends to go ahead at their pace. I hadn’t properly trained, and I was absolutely hurting—feet, legs, lungs. Everything. One way or another, I knew I had to get myself across that finish line. I can tell you, it wasn’t pretty. I walked a good bit. And when I wasn’t walking, I did something only vaguely resembling running. But, somehow, I managed to finish.

When I finally made my way across the finish line, the cheering crowd had long since dispersed and the volunteers were cleaning up from the race. My friends were worried something had happened to me. Not my best moment, but I finished the race. As I look back on this event more than 20 years ago, I can see that it was a turning point for me. I still remember coming down that home stretch seeing volunteers sweeping the cups off the street. Rather than being proud for finishing, I was mad at myself. How could I have let myself get so far from what I was once capable of? Why didn’t I train harder? Before I crossed the finish line, I vowed: Never again.

I learned a lot about myself that day. I let that disappointment sink in for about a month or two before concluding that I really needed to step up my game. No longer would I take my fitness for granted. I signed up for a marathon. You may be thinking that was a bit extreme, and perhaps it was, but like I said, I was mad at myself. I wanted a seriously ambitious stretch goal to force myself into action.

This time I trained properly. And you know what? It was actually easier for me to complete the marathon than it was to finish that 10K race. And a marathon is more than four times longer!

I learned that it all comes down to preparation. I put in the time and effort necessary to be at my best. And my best was all about finishing the marathon in good (not great) time. I wasn’t competing to win. I was competing with myself to do the best that I could. Finishing was a big part of that, and it has helped me calibrate what I was capable of. I kept training for marathons and also expanded into triathlons...
and other extreme and no so extreme sports. At the time of this writing, I have completed more than a dozen marathons and six Ironman triathlons. I have developed a fitness mindset, and it has become part of who I am.

From time to time, I am asked why I do such extreme fitness activities. What drives me? For the record, it’s not because I’m still mad at myself for that 10K. I stay active for three reasons.

First, I am driven by potential and possibilities. I want to know what I’m capable of, and that requires stretching the boundaries from time to time. I also want to show others what is possible and inspire them. When I look back on my life, I want to know that I gave it my best and inspired some people along the way. The reality is, we don’t know what we are capable of until we take that first step.

Second, I love fitness for the learning aspect. There are some great life lessons to be learned from sports. In fact, every time I train for or participate in an activity, I learn something new about myself, be it something to do with my nutrition before or during a race, something about my pace or my preparation, or perhaps something as simple as the fact that I can accomplish this goal. I have grown on so many levels since starting this journey. I’ve gained a better sense of goals and focus. I am more comfortable operating out of my comfort zone. I even look at seemingly insurmountable challenges differently.

Third, I want to have a healthy lifestyle for my wife and kids. I hope I set a good example for them and make them proud. I have found that the more fit I am, the more engaged I am with the most important people in my life. I have more energy, not less.

You’ve no doubt heard the saying that it is the journey, not the destination, that makes it all worth it. For me it’s been both. I’m proud of the destinations I’ve reached and grateful for what I’ve learned along the way.

During both my preparation for an event and the event itself, I will undoubtedly face some unexpected challenges—a flat tire, a leaky goggle, or a muscle cramp. I have come to rely on my mental toughness and ability to push through such obstacles, but I’m not sure if I’ve
always had that ability. Or maybe it’s evolved with age and knowledge. The more we overcome, the more we stretch our comfort zone and boundaries. What was once thought impossible becomes possible. No matter what my time is when I cross the finish line, I feel a tremendous sense of pride and joy—not just for the accomplishment itself, but also for all the arduous work and sacrifice that went into it.

Along the way, in both leadership and fitness, I have learned that preparation determines outcomes. Know that I am not advocating for you to run a marathon or do an Ironman. Your fitness decisions—much like your leadership ones—are highly personal. What I am saying is don’t sit still. Take that first step. Take whatever next step you are comfortable with, or perhaps slightly uncomfortable with. You may surprise yourself!

Leadership and fitness make a powerful combination. They will both take you on a journey of self-discovery. Both require self-awareness and preparation to be at your best. They require passion and commitment. Both can inspire others. They provide an opportunity to test yourself under pressure. Both will keep you humble. No matter what you are capable of, you are frequently reminded that you are human.

Self-awareness and training will absolutely make a difference in how well you do and how prepared you are to respond when things don’t go as planned. And there will be many times things don’t go as planned. I’ve had my share of those days. In fact, that 10K story could have just as easily been about a professional situation in which I was unprepared as a leader—one in which I went in overconfident or didn’t prepare properly.

Over the years, as I’ve worked with athletes and leaders, I have developed a set of four guiding principles. They are easily stated yet difficult to embody. They cover the full cycle from idea or goal to accomplishment, and include the approach needed for the uncertainties and challenges encountered along the way. Throughout this book, I’ll share leadership and fitness vignettes based on these principles and how I’ve seen them come to life:
• **Principle 1.** You never know what you’re capable of until you take that first step.
• **Principle 2.** You must put in the effort.
• **Principle 3.** You learn more about yourself when times are tough. (In other words: Never give up.)
• **Principle 4.** What you consume matters.

**At the Intersection of Physical and Leadership Fitness**

You may be wondering, “What does all this have to do with leadership?” I’ve applied and shaped these principles throughout my leadership journey. Each one aligns with what it takes to be at your leadership best. I have seen them come to life in countless other leaders I have worked with, as well as learning from my own experience.

When I think back to the first time I was a leader, it does not conjure memories of excellence. I was 27 years old and through tenure and attrition had become the second-longest serving person on my team. There were 20 people on my team, many of whom had become my friends over the years. That alone presents its own set of challenges, but I was not prepared for them or the responsibilities of leadership.

*Not prepared.* That is the exact same condition that contributed to my first dismal 10K performance. The result was similar. I was nowhere near my peak and I was disappointed in myself.

Unfortunately, unlike the 10K, this time my lack of preparation affected others. If there is one significant difference between fitness and leadership, it is the direct impact you have on others if you neglect it or get it wrong. The stakes are much higher with leadership, and therefore the actions you take are that much more important.

Looking back, I didn’t trust the team, hadn’t earned their trust, and had a command and control mentality. I was always looking for that gotcha moment. I was in over my head. And much like the 10K, my performance was built upon a shaky foundation at best. I had no idea what it meant to lead others. I hadn’t trained or consumed anything related to leadership. I’d never read a leadership book, taken a course, or shadowed a seasoned leader. I didn’t have a mentor. I just showed up.
It wasn’t until eight years later as I was preparing to take on my next leadership assignment that, upon reflection, I realized just how poorly I had done in my first role as a leader and the impact my leadership had. It wasn’t all bad, but I still cringe when I think about how I acted back then.

For me, taking that first step meant realizing that was not the type of leader I wanted to be. Beyond that, additional effort was required. It is equally important to know the type of leader you want to be, and for me that ideal has evolved over time. An important lesson, though, is not to underestimate the power that clarity and focus have on performance.

This time around I was determined to be a better leader—more focused, trusting, and supportive. My team was smaller, at six, but it had more visibility, significance, and complexity because of its cross-functional nature and project types. I had now taken several courses, read some books, and even had two highly respectable leader role models I could look to for advice—both of whom I still admire, respect, and consult today. My experience in that leadership position was still far from outstanding, but it was much improved in terms of overall team engagement and outcomes.

But leadership is about people. And, just like reading a book about marathons will not help you run faster, books and courses alone aren’t likely to make you a great leader. It takes observation, practice, and reflection.

However, at the time I thought I had leadership figured out. I continued leading smaller teams until my next big step and major learning opportunity as a leader came, when I was given the responsibility of leading a team of more than 25 professionals. I set a vision, met with my team leads regularly, and provided guidance and direction, and we delivered meaningful results.

Unfortunately, we don’t know what we don’t know. And what I didn’t know was that I hadn’t truly embraced the people aspect of leadership. I was simply leading how I wanted to be led: giving direction and providing autonomy. It wasn’t until I received feedback from a
360-degree assessment that I learned that my style didn’t resonate with everyone. The feedback was generally quite positive, but I also learned that a few people on the team preferred a more involved style.

As leaders, it is our responsibility to help others be their best and meet them where they are in terms of style and support—the essence of servant leadership. This time I learned about the importance of perceptions, knowing how you are showing up as a leader, the value of others’ perceptions, and the subjectivity of leadership. The reality is that leaders are only as good as others think they are. This insight helped me understand the importance of leading how others want to be led, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach based on your personal preferences.

I learned firsthand the value of self-awareness for being at your best. In fact, I think self-awareness should be the starting point for all personal growth and development. Otherwise, how would you know what to work on? As a leader, learning should be continuous. Once you realize that you’ve never fully and truly arrived—which is an endeavor requiring ongoing effort—that is when you are on the road to being at your leadership best.

I wish I knew earlier what I know now. It’s true of my leadership journey, and I have heard the same from countless leaders and athletes. We all wonder just how good we could have been with the right preparation and focus—and the right training.

Whether athlete or leader, some accept that their best days are behind them. However, those who realize their story is still being written have the opportunity to change, to elevate their game, and to reach their personal best. Those are the people who realize that destiny is written not for us but by us.

**About This Book**

I wrote *Peak Leadership Fitness: Elevating Your Leadership Game* to share the lessons I’ve learned along the way at the intersection of physical and leadership fitness. Like physical fitness, your journey to peak leadership fitness begins with a commitment and requires action. It is not a single, discrete activity. It is a mindset of continuous improvement. This book
will help you identify where to get started and which activities will guide and support your ongoing journey toward peak leadership fitness.

This book is not just about my firsthand experiences in fitness or leadership. I have had the opportunity to work with and learn from many others, and the parallels amaze me. Additionally, the book is grounded in adult learning and development and leadership research, such as Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner’s *Learning in Adulthood* (2006), Merriam and Bierema’s *Adult Learning* (2013), Knowles’ *Self Directed Learning* (1983), Knowles and Holton III’s *The Adult Learner* (2015), Greenleaf and Spears’s *Servant Leadership* (2002), Burns’s *Leadership* (2010), and Bass and Bass’s *The Bass Handbook of Leadership* (2008).

**Who Is This Book For?**

If you want your leadership development to be transformational for you and those you lead, then this book is for you. *Peak Leadership Fitness* is not about checking a box. The leadership development industry is booming, and there is no shortage of opportunities for your development. But checking the box rarely leads to meaningful gains, much less peak leadership fitness.

I wrote this book to help you decide where to start and how to make the most of your often-scarce, yet important resources: your time and money. We’ll discuss different areas to focus on to help you work toward your peak leadership fitness—from taking your pulse and building your foundation to reinforcing your leadership strength, flexibility, and endurance. I’ve applied proven practices to help you identify low-cost, high-impact activities that will give you the best results.

There are many reasons (that is, excuses) for not striving for peak leadership fitness. The most common ones I hear are, “I’m too busy” or “I don’t have the money or organizational support.” Unfortunately, I don’t see that reality changing anytime soon. This book is designed to help you combat those excuses and take control of your leadership development.
I tend to interpret these excuses as really meaning, “Leadership isn’t a priority to me.” However, I guarantee you that it is important to those you lead. I believe that if something truly matters, you will find a way around anything that is standing in your way.

I wrote this book for those of you who truly care about leadership, but just don’t know where to turn to be at your best. For those of you who want to have greater control over your development and realize results, I wrote this for you, too.

More specifically, I wrote this book to help emerging and mid-career leaders establish good leadership fitness habits earlier in their careers. Rather than focusing on a select few, I want to introduce meaningful, high-impact, low-cost leadership development for anyone who wants a higher level of leadership expertise. That means no more excuses.

Regardless of where you are in your career, it is never too soon or too late to focus on your leadership fitness. If you are in the early or middle stages of your career, this is about building good habits to stay at your leadership best. If you are at a later stage of your career, this is about defining, or redefining, your legacy, re-energizing your leadership, and developing future leaders. It requires taking that first step and knowing where to focus your efforts to get the best results.

Another important audience for this book is anyone responsible for developing leadership programs within their organization. I have been fortunate to lead teams responsible for developing numerous award-winning leadership programs. Those programs were built based on the same guiding principles that I’ve incorporated into this book.

**Getting the Most From This Book**

Think of *Peak Leadership Fitness* as your personal trainer or coach. Personal trainers and coaches customize the routine for their clients. They meet them where they are in terms of fitness and abilities. This book is no different. It can help, but you’ve got a role, too.

I designed this book to meet you where you are in terms of your development needs, interests, goals, and preferences. Like a fingerprint, no two leadership fitness plans are exactly alike. Just as you wouldn’t go
to the doctor’s office and expect the same treatment as another patient with different symptoms and medical history, the same leadership development activities should not be prescribed for everyone.

The book is divided into two parts—Foundations of Fitness (chapters 1-3) and Steps to Becoming Leadership Fit (chapters 4-7). Here is a closer look at what you’ll find in each chapter:

Chapter 1 defines leadership fitness; chapter 2 delivers the fitness principles, which is the motivational starting point; and chapter 3 discusses the leadership mindset—what it is, why it is important, and how to develop yours. Chapter 4 is about establishing a baseline of self-awareness as well as a personal leadership development plan. Chapter 5 helps you think about which leadership skills to focus on and how to build upon your foundation of knowledge. Much like exercising to elevate your heart rate, the focus here is on elevating your knowledge base. This chapter also introduces you to the four knowledge zones for developing your leadership capabilities. In chapter 6 I highlight the best ways to learn through practice. And in chapter 7 I focus on how to best build your leadership endurance, including the roles of feedback, reflection, and establishing good leadership development habits.

As you read through each chapter, think about which approach to development best suites your needs, resources, and preferences. You can be flexible about which activities you incorporate into your plan. For example, if you don’t have access to mentor circles or if job shadowing is not an option in your organization, it’s OK to focus your attention on a different type of activity.

Throughout the book, I incorporate multiple tools that reinforce the concepts and vignettes that show the concepts applied in a relatable and practical way. Each chapter also includes fitness tips that are intended to be microbursts of information to help you get the most out of your development activities. You’ll find a complete list of these resources in the appendix.

One additional tool I include is a cost-impact matrix of development opportunities. The two biggest challenges most leaders face when it comes to their development are limited resources (time and money)
and not knowing where to start. This tool provides a framework to help you make decisions and prioritize the development activities that meet your specific needs. It is not meant to be an exact science, with detailed calculations for every possible activity. Rather, it is based upon my years of experience, coupled with some assumptions. The primary assumption is the phrase when done well. Throughout this book, I map activities to the matrix with the assumption that they are done well. Actual costs and impact will vary, based on how the activity is implemented, who is involved, and the support you have. Your perspective on an activity may also vary, and that is to be expected. Consider my perspective and activity mapping as a starting point or guide, and place additional emphasis on your experience. The matrix itself is meant to initiate your thought process, to help you determine where to start with your leadership development and how to incorporate the best low-cost, high-impact activities into your development routine.

Cost refers to both the direct and indirect costs associated with an activity. Specifically, cost is about time and money. Impact is about the types of results you can expect to get from the activity relative to making a difference for yourself, those you lead, and your organization. When it comes to leadership development, higher costs do not always (or even often) yield the best results. Similarly, I am not suggesting you should always go for the low-cost option.

This would be a very short book if money and time were no object. I would tell you to hire a leadership coach to guide you throughout your development. It’s not a coincidence that those same high-cost coaches would have you run through a similar set of steps outlined in this book. I would encourage you to have them there for you every step of the way to help you focus and to challenge you, just as a personal trainer would do in the gym.

For most leaders I work with, though, that’s not a realistic option. Time and money matter, and so do results. This book’s real benefit is that it acts as a guide who is there with you every step of the way—to help you make decisions that are right for you in terms of the cost and potential impact the activity can have. The goals and actions are up to you.
In physical fitness, we learn some basic dos and don’ts—some rules for ourselves: Exercise limits. How to prepare for an event. How to evaluate our progress . . . honestly. How not to kid ourselves. And how to plan our fitness routine and actions in the short term and the long term.

It’s really no different when reaching your peak leadership fitness. In Part 1, you’ll learn how to be honest with your leadership self, take the first step, navigate the tough times, persevere, properly prepare, and develop that killer mindset. All according to the Tobin Four Fitness Principles.
WHAT IS PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS?

Are you leadership fit? I’m not asking whether you can run a mile, do an hour of hot yoga, or do 20 push-ups. Being leadership fit is about being at the top of your leadership game. It requires great balance of both the people and task aspects of leadership. You must be focused, engaged, and adaptive while delivering positive results. It’s about your performance and ongoing personal improvement. It requires you to take an active role in incorporating ongoing development to continuously develop your leadership skills. And it’s about being transformational—both for you and for those you lead.

Peak Leadership Fitness
An aspirational state built upon consistently striving toward exceptional interpersonal and technical skills, adaptability through learning, and consistently positive results. It is built by balancing capability, capacity, and mental toughness. It is accomplished through strong and accurate self-awareness and a combination of relevant activities as part of a regular development routine. Peak leadership fitness allows you to bring your full and best energy to your leadership.

Peak leadership fitness is dynamic and aspirational because once you realize your potential and achieve your goals, you have a new platform, or baseline, on which you can continue to learn and grow. I think that is great news, because it implies you already have a starting
point for your leadership fitness, with the potential to further elevate your leadership. It also implies that you have far greater and ongoing potential for growth.

Leadership fitness requires physical energy, emotional connection, and mental toughness. It is about capability and capacity. Capability comes from your knowledge and skills, while capacity comes from your energy and engagement. This all needs to be balanced with mental toughness and a leadership mindset. Your mindset evolves from experiences, feedback, and reflection. The best leaders can effectively manage these attributes and continuously evolve through self-awareness, feedback, and reflection. Peak leadership requires active participation and planning.

So, are you working toward your leadership best? Are you bringing your best energy to your leadership? Are you taking the necessary steps to achieve your peak leadership fitness? If you’re not striving for peak leadership fitness, you may not be working out as a leader.

Two Challenges Facing Today’s Leaders

I have worked with, coached, and taught many leaders during my career, and I’ve found that they face two critical challenges when it comes to their development:

- **Challenge 1:** Today’s leaders do not have enough time to focus on development. There are simply too many demands, and development doesn’t just take a back seat—it often rides in the trunk. This is particularly evident with more seasoned leaders who often have so many priorities that leadership development rarely rises to the top. Unfortunately, with the increasing focus on results and demands on leaders’ time, this is only going to become more challenging.

- **Challenge 2:** Many leaders don’t know where to start. This is further exacerbated by a crowded leadership development landscape. It has become increasingly difficult to make sense of which activities will yield the best results. Consequently, many leaders become passive participants in their growth—waiting for someone else to serve up their development.
Some leaders do nothing when it comes to their development, or worse, they invest their valuable time and money on the wrong activities, which includes anything that does not help reinforce or improve leadership. This can be costly both financially and in terms of misdirected effort and results.

Much like your physical health, when it comes to your leadership fitness, what you consume matters. You will not stay healthy by fasting for extended periods or consuming the wrong things. The implications extend beyond time and money to include performance and engagement. It is too easy for leaders to build unhealthy habits around their development and become disengaged from their own growth and performance. The most common unhealthy habit I see leaders engage in is inattention to their development. Most people realize they should focus on their fitness (both leadership and physical), but other priorities often get in the way. Life gets in the way. Over time, this takes its toll and performance suffers.

Let me transition to some good news. Leadership development does not need to be expensive or overly time consuming. Much like your physical health and fitness, though, it cannot be ignored or neglected. You must take action and build good habits. In the introduction, I described four fitness principles, which I’ll discuss further in the next chapter. The first fitness principle states that you must take the first step. And that step should be well thought out as to your goals, your resources, and what will give you the best results.

Why Should You Be Leadership Fit?
Great leadership is not about you; it is about those you lead. A key aspect of leadership is engaging and motivating the people you lead. Unfortunately, low engagement has reached epidemic proportions. There are multiple studies that show that a significant amount of employee engagement—up to 70 percent in some cases—can be attributed to a person’s leader. This means that if we can get leadership right, we’ll have a real chance to create an engaged workforce. This becomes a force multiplier, too, where your actions inspire multiple people to strive to
be their best and bring their best energy to what they do. Now that’s the type of organization and team I want to be part of.

However, there is much work to be done when it comes to engagement. Many of those same studies that highlight the importance of leadership to drive engagement also show that as little as 15 percent of employees feel engaged. That is a huge gap with significant implications. When you factor in the lost productivity and associated turnover costs, the implications of low engagement quickly add up.

Becoming leadership fit is a major step toward bridging the engagement gap by inspiring those you lead. I have seen this firsthand. People want to connect with a vision. They want to be energized by their leaders. Members of those teams have a tremendous amount of initiative, effort, and commitment. Leadership expert Steve Arneson offers up a profound question that has stuck with me: Do you want to be known as the type of leader who does something to those you lead or for those you lead?

**Make Your Leadership Development Transformational**

Dave was a product manager at a large global technology organization. He told me that during his annual performance review, his boss said he needed to work on his leadership skills. Dave was completely surprised by the feedback, and wasn’t exactly sure what that even meant. He thought everyone already liked him.

I told Dave that leadership is not about being liked. It is about setting a clear direction, motivating and inspiring people, and developing them. It is about bringing out the best in people and getting results. Dave said he had never thought about it that way. In fact, he said he hadn’t given it much thought at all. However, Dave knew he needed to improve or his career opportunities would be limited.

**FITNESS TIP**

Great leadership is not about you; it is about those you lead.
Dave’s response to my next question would have a profound effect on the direction we would take and the results he ultimately achieved.

“Are you looking to ‘check a box’ or do you want this to be transformational?” I asked.

To his credit, Dave paused, thought about it, and then said he wanted this to be transformational. I could see that Dave was eager to get started right away, but he had no idea where to begin.

What Dave didn’t know was that he had already begun. He recognized he needed to improve and described the type of leader he wanted to be: one who provides vision, direction, and feedback, and who develops future leaders. Stating his intentions was the easy part—akin to having a New Year’s resolution. Bringing it to life was going to take commitment and effort.

Dave and I immediately began to outline our plan of attack using the same plan in this book. With his boss’s support, Dave completed a 360-degree assessment that included input from Dave’s current boss, a former boss, six of his peers, his three direct reports, and four other colleagues. Dave was careful to select people that he knew would give him honest, candid feedback.

When his results were ready, Dave was nervous. “I have no idea what to expect with these results,” he told me. “I didn’t sleep well last night thinking about what people might have said about me.”

I reminded him that this was an opportunity to see how he was being perceived—positively and negatively—and that it was better to be aware of this than not. “Awareness doesn’t change the perception; it drives action.”

Dave’s feedback covered a wide spectrum of responses, and although generally positive, he was discouraged by some of the comments. He skimmed right over the positive ones, but lingered on the negative, such as, “Dave is often unapproachable” and “There’s a lack of direction under Dave.”

Feeling defensive, Dave explained that he was busy working on an important new product development, hence his closed door, and that he thought everyone knew what their responsibilities were.

Then he paused, realizing that his defenses would not change these perceptions. He even admitted that he could get so focused on his projects that he walked right by his team without even acknowledging them,
only realizing what had just happened after the fact, if at all. Once Dave accepted the feedback, we worked on a plan to capitalize on his strengths and improve a couple other areas.

Dave’s plan included a steady yet balanced diet of activities, such as mentoring two recent hires in other departments to share his business knowledge and shadowing Brenda from the marketing department, who was regarded as an amazing leader with high emotional intelligence, strong marketing acumen, and acute strategic planning skills. Dave was an active participant in the shadowing relationship, asking many questions while also providing insights of his own. His experience with Brenda became transformational and helped him in ways he hadn’t imagined.

In fact, the experience turned out to be mutually beneficial. Working with Dave helped Brenda see more clearly how and when disconnects occurred with her own staff. While she wasn’t that enthusiastic about someone “following her around” at first, she found that Dave’s questions led to insights she might not have gained from a direct report. For Brenda, the experience with Dave served as a restart on staff development. It increased her capability and her staff’s trust in their own intuition.

Dave also found a leadership podcast about team engagement, being approachable, and creating an open-door culture. He committed to keeping a journal to record his thoughts from his shadowing experiences and listening to the podcasts. He divided his journal pages into three columns of information, recording what he learned, what he was going to try, and insights from applying ideas.

Dave and I kept in touch often as he worked on his plan. He occasionally reminded me how easy it would be to push these activities down on his priority list. He simply had too many meetings to attend, and he had to get the new product launched. But despite these obstacles, he remained committed to the plan.

After two months, Dave started noticing some minor changes. He made greeting his team a morning ritual. He made it a priority to always acknowledge them when he passed them in the hallway. He would stop by their desks to check in, and they soon began stopping by his office, too. Some of the conversations they had were casual, but many had a
business focus. In fact, during one of those conversations a direct report helped Dave work through a big challenge with the new product he was working on.

Seven months after Dave’s initial feedback, he launched his new product, and it exceeded many of the projections. This was in part due to his having redefined the marketing strategy based on input from Brenda. In addition to the strategic planning knowledge she had shared with him over the months, she also provided important insights that contributed to the success of the new product launch.

Transformation happens when you move from ideas to action in a deliberate way. The result can be marked in time as a version of you before and after. Dave was deliberate in his approach to his development when he accepted the feedback, decided on what kind of leader he wanted to be, developed a plan, and took action. There was an opportunity at every step along the way for him to give up or put off his commitment. But he persisted and the results paid off.

Motivation has to come from within. So why do you want to achieve your peak leadership fitness? Is it because you want to climb the corporate ladder? Do you want to make a difference in the lives of those you lead? Do you want to be a leader known for developing future leaders and delivering results?

If you want optimal results, one thing is certain—you must shift from leadership development activities that merely check a box to those that are transformational. Don’t be a leadership couch potato—doing nothing or passively participating in activities that come your way. Now is the time to take control and become the leader you’ve always wanted—and the one your team and organization need.

**Tracking Your Performance**

Let’s summarize some basics:

- If you sense you aren’t the leader you thought you were or the leader you want to be, I’m here to tell you that your
intuition may be correct. You’ve been picking up the signals from somewhere. Your leadership glands are telling you to improve your leadership fitness.

- Start a leadership fitness log. Write down all the clues, comments, or glances—or moments of deadly silence—you’ve noticed coming from your team and colleagues. Be honest with yourself. Then write down what you said or didn’t say and what you did or didn’t do that prompted those behaviors.
- Leadership development requires self-awareness and focused effort. You’ll learn more about both in later chapters.
- Remember, leadership is not about you; it is primarily about them.
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