

“Plan to Matter”

Creating Cultures of Leadership in Your Life and Organization

Presentation Overview

Best Practices for Fostering Everyday Leadership

What I intend to highlight are six “best practices” for creating cultures of leadership in the workplaces and lives of the audience.

1. Embrace an “Add Value” Economy

I argue that leadership is often making one big decision to make many consistent small, positive decisions, and that it's important to recognize the profoundly positive impact that can come from seemingly insignificant actions. When I speak, my focus is on sharing stories that I hope highlight how the biggest determinants of what people think of us and our organizations are not the things on which we focus the most time, money, and stress. I've discovered that it is not the goals we set, or even the goals we reach that most significantly shape peoples' impressions of us. Rather, it's how we choose to go about accomplishing our goals on an everyday basis that can play the most significant role in shaping whether or not we are perceived as leaders (and whether or not our organizations are perceived as dynamic and successful).

I'm often successful at getting people to reframe their idea of what leadership means, but not always. This became extraordinarily clear to me at a conference late last year.

I had just finished speaking at a major Canadian business school when a young man came up to me and said, "Drew, I've seen you speak three times this year, and I really like the stories that you tell."

I thanked him, only to have him throw me quite the curveball.

"Do you want to know what's wrong with you?" He asked. "You never tell anybody how to win."

Confused, I asked him "I'm sorry, win what?"

He rolled his eyes at me, and in an exasperated voice, said, "Come on, this is a game we're playing here. I've known that from the very first time that somebody gave me a grade. I mean, why would they be grading us and ranking us if wasn't to make sure that the people at the top got something the people at the bottom didn't get? The fact is, there is only so much money, and there are only so many jobs, and if I don't get them somebody else will. Drew, you're not doing anybody any favors by telling them that there is some other reality than that. All you're doing is setting them up to get destroyed in the game. And if you really want to help people, you've got to stop doing that and you've got to start telling people how to win."

And he walked off.

I stood there stunned, but I realize now that he was totally right. In all of my presentations I never spent any time telling anyone how to win that game. And perhaps if I was going to take an hour out of people's lives I owed it to them to at least give them my best shot at telling them how to win that game.

So here, for all of you, is my best attempt at indicating how to win that game.

Please don't play that game.

I don't believe there are any winners in that game. There are only people who have been beaten.

I fear that once we accept the idea that life is a game, we inherently buy into the idea that there are winners and there are losers. And I believe that philosophy of winners versus losers leads us to believe that we're living in a world of scarcity, a perspective I believe stifles true leadership and leads to so many of the things that we are not proud of in this world. It's what leads to greed, jealousy, gossip mongering, and the bullying that begins on our playground and continues well up into our boardrooms.

So much of the work that I do now is to try to convince organizations and individuals to decide to live in a different type of economy. Because right now I believe that we are living in an economy of scarcity, and I believe that we can choose to live in an economy of abundance. Because maybe there are only so many jobs, and maybe there is only so much money, but I honestly believe that there is no limit to the amount of satisfaction, self-worth, and happiness available to us if we are able to separate those things from our paychecks and from our job titles.

However I spent a decade-and-a-half of my life in higher education, and the problem is that we are never taught to look at the world that way. In my time in the education system I've come to believe that there are lessons that are learned though never explicitly taught. And one of the most powerful of those lessons is that "the secret to happiness is freedom, and the secret to freedom is money."

The result? Thousands of people have been trained to chase money and jobs as the primary goals in their lives, and to use money and jobs as the primary indicators of whether or not they are a "leader".

And I was one of those people. I chased jobs and money as my gateways to happiness. And I was good at it. And I had good jobs and made a lot of money at a young age.

And I was tremendously unhappy.

Looking back now I realize it's because I would get up and go to work every day to try to impress somebody that I worked for so that they could give me my life goals.

*So that **someone else** could give me my life goals.*

And I realize now that if we want to foster more leaders we have to teach more people that money and jobs make lousy life goals, because ultimately you're not in charge of them.

You see, how hard you work and how well you work will always play a role in how much money you make. But as long as you work for someone else [and let's face it, most of us will spend most of our lives

working for somebody else], how much money you make is somebody else's decision. If you get promoted, or more responsibility, or a bigger job title, it is because someone else has the power to give you those things. And when we tie our fundamental life goals to someone else's whims, I think that's tremendously disempowering. The fact that most people know (at least subconsciously) that the things that they are ultimately chasing in their life that they believe will make them happy have to be handed down from someone else is one of the reasons so few people are comfortable identifying themselves as leaders. When deep down we know that the things that we want in our lives have to be given to us from someone else, it's awfully hard to feel like you're leading anything.

I believe a life in an economy of abundance starts when we say to ourselves, "I will no longer create goals in my life that can only be handed to me by someone else." I believe the ability to truly feel like a leader begins when you embrace a single goal: "I will endeavour to add tremendous value in every interaction of which I am a part."

But what does adding value actually mean? Adding value means trying to give someone something they didn't even know they needed, and something they didn't even know they wanted, every time you interact with them.

Adding value means no longer asking, "what do I have to do to get a great job?", or "what do I need to do to shine brighter than everyone around me?" Adding value instead means asking "who do I need to be to be the type of person who is great at jobs?", and "who do I need to be to be able to make everyone around me shine even brighter?"

Because I believe when you ask "what do I have to do?", You are focusing on pleasing other people. When you ask "who do I need to be?", You are focusing on what you expect from yourself, and that is a fundamental shift in your understanding of who is ultimately in charge of your life.

I believe true leaders do not treat jobs and money as goals in and of themselves. Instead, they accept that they are the natural by-products that come as a result of adding tremendous value. As such, it is far better to put your energy, time and focus into figuring out how you can add tremendous value instead of how you can make money. The money you make is a by-product of the value you add.

This is not to say that living in an economy of abundance requires giving up on dreams of business success or personal financial wealth. It does not mean that you cease to focus on profit. Rather, it means acknowledging that profit is only one type of value, and whoever adds the most value will inevitably reap the biggest profits. Not just financially, but emotionally, socially, physically, and spiritually as well.

If we can find a way to shift focus from profit to value, I think we can begin to generate far more positive behaviour, and as such, far more leaders.

2. Define the things you want to define you

So how can we aim to more effectively “add value” in our interpersonal interactions? I believe the first step is to more effectively define the things that we want to define us.

One of the best pieces of leadership advice I was ever given was: “when you don’t know what to do in a situation, ask yourself, ‘what would the person I want to be do in this situation?’ Then do that.”

What I have discovered however, is that very few of us have actually given enough thought to who it is that we actually want to be. This was made clear to me early on in my career.

A few years ago, at the end of a first-year university workshop on leadership theory with a heavy focus on the ideas of transformational and servant leadership, a young woman who had been sitting near the front approached me.

"Sir," she said shyly, "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"What exactly is it you don't understand?" I asked.

"I'm afraid it's leadership sir."

"Well," I said with a small smile, "I wouldn't worry too much about that - we have all semester to explore what leadership means."

She shook her head.

"That's just it sir. I understood leadership before I came today, and now I'm afraid I don't."

I've come to hope that many people walk out of my workshops feeling that is the case, but at the time, I was quite upset as someone endeavouring to be an educator.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," she said. "I'm an international student, and in my country we're told that the smartest people make the best leaders. I was always taught the smartest people are the ones who get the best grades, so getting the best grades is what earns you leadership."

"But," she continued, "what you talked about today makes me think that leadership means something different. But it's more complicated. I just want to know what 'leadership' means in simple English."

I smiled with tremendous confidence and opened my mouth to provide her with my well-rehearsed and carefully thought-out personal definition of leadership.

However, nothing came out.

My mind was a blank. I realized that not only did I lack a well-rehearsed answer to her question, I lacked any answer at all.

I realized that I knew the theories of leadership, that I could tell stories of leadership, and that I could help people identify and develop the skills that were integral to leadership...what I didn't have was my own, personal definition of what leadership meant, "in simple English."

What I had come across was one of those questions to which you're certain you know the answer...until someone actually asks the question.

It genuinely shook me, as leadership was a value I was aiming to embody every day of my life, yet I found myself unable to articulate exactly what it meant to me. I realized that while I recognized many of the values I wanted to embody in my life, I hadn't actually defined them.

I went home that night, and at the age of 28, decided for the first time to actually try to make myself present in a solitary exploration of my values. That young woman had made me realize that leadership was a value I wanted to embody every day in my life. This was something I had always intrinsically known, but had never actually taken the time to understand. I realized there's a distinct difference between recognizing something and understanding it, and I determined I wanted to be more deliberate in thinking about what it was I wanted to stand for in my everyday behaviour.

And so I took a few hours to engage in an activity I recommend to everyone: I sat down and listed the values I wanted to embody every day in my life. The list took shape quickly: "leadership"; "respect"; "transparency"; "accountability"; "passion" to name just a few. At times I stopped myself and asked, "wait...is that really a 'value'?" But then I realized I was okay with seeing a "value" as being any concept or belief that I felt could positively influence my behaviour.

Where things slowed down is in the next step: I looked at each value in turn and asked myself, "If that young woman came up to me and asked me to explain, in 'simple English', what this word means, what would I say?" Over and over again I was forced to come to grips with the fact that these ideas, these "fundamental values" in my life, lacked clear definition for me. I knew they represented *something* important to me, and that they certainly sounded good, but it proved a much more difficult, though ultimately rewarding, process than I anticipated.

Step three was even tougher. Once I was happy with my definition for each value, I asked myself, "what is one thing I can do each day to make sure that I embody this particular value?"

However, that last step was crucial – because it allowed me to clearly identify targets that represented the realization of my goal of "living my values". I believe that leadership comes *from creating opportunities* to live your values, as well as living them when the opportunity arises or the situation demands it. Honestly, I've come to see setting goals as planning celebrations – you're identifying a concrete moment when you're allowed to say to yourself, "well done."

I encourage all of you to take a moment soon to take those same three steps:

1. Create as exhaustive a list as you can of the "values I hope to embody every day of my life".

2. Create as comprehensive a definition as possible for what each of those values means to you. Ask yourself, “if someone who spoke another language asked me to explain what this value means in ‘simple English’, what would I say?”
3. Identify specific actions you could take every day to ensure you demonstrate that value (I will demonstrate a specific process for doing this below).

If we don’t take the time to define the things that we hope will define us, we’re always going to feel as if we aren’t living up to the person we want to be. After all, how do you give yourself credit for hitting a target you’ve never actually identified? If you don’t clearly define what “accountability” means to you, you may be embodying it every single day, but never giving yourself the opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate that fact.

For example, let’s say that you set a goal of running a half-marathon. You would spend several months training in anticipation of the day of the run. However, at what specific moment would you allow yourself to feel as if you had accomplished your goal? I would argue it was the moment you crossed the finish line. It’s crucial that we create finish lines (even those we can cross again and again) for the leadership values we hope to embody. Otherwise, we are denying ourselves the opportunity

I’d argue that setting goals is basically planning celebrations. We set goals we want to reach in our career, in our financial life, and in our health and fitness; I would argue we need to more consciously set character and value goals.

3. Plan to matter

In my organization, the approach we took to making sure we “lived our values” (and in the process, added tremendous value), was the creation of questions. We sought to create a set of questions that, if asked and answered each day, would ensure that we had operationalized the values we identified as important in Step “2” above.

The questions we created were:

- What have I done today to recognize someone else’s leadership? (To embody “*impact*”)
- What have I done today to make it more likely I will learn something? (To embody “*personal growth*”)
- What have I done today to make it more likely someone else will learn something? (To embody “*empowerment*”)
- What positive thing have I said about someone to their face today? (To embody “*recognition and gratitude*”)
- What positive thing have I said about someone when they aren’t even in the room today? (To embody “*recognition and gratitude*”)
- What have I done today to be good to myself? (To embody “*Self-Respect*”)

NOTE: Each one of these questions will be accompanied by specific examples of how they can contribute to a culture of leadership in the workplace. For instance, the following example will be given after "What have I done to recognize someone else's leadership?"

The English language is a language of qualifiers: "perhaps"; "maybe"; "possibly"; "potentially". It is a language of disbelief, uncertainty, and limitations.

One of the most prevalent and restrictive of these limiting words is "just".

Our organizations are filled with "I'm just a..." employees. "I'm just a receptionist"; "I'm just a salesperson"; "I'm just middle management". It's likely that each one of us has said something similar about ourselves, or at the very least, what we were attempting to do: "I'm just trying to get to the end of this project"; "we just have to figure out a way to deal with this".

Every time we use the word "just", we're telling people that who we are and what we're doing is unimportant. Every time we say we're "just" something we're giving people permission to expect less from us. Our lives and workplaces are filled with extraordinary people who regularly diminish themselves in this way, and in the process, many convince themselves that it's true. As such, I believe that one of the simplest but most powerful things we can do to enhance our leadership is to refuse to allow people to diminish themselves in front of us.

I believe that leadership recognized is leadership created, and a commitment to banishing the word "just" from our vocabulary and our workplaces can have a profound impact. After all, in many organizations, the employees who have the most consistent contact with those outside the organization (and therefore play the biggest role in what people think about your organization) are often those who are paid the least. And even those who take pride in their job and recognize they make valuable contributions do not miss the fact that their position has been judged less monetarily valuable. Often, no matter how hard we try, or how little sense it makes, we cannot avoid allowing our sense of self-worth to be tied to where we fall on the spectrum of financial compensation.

Each of us can play a small role in helping to counteract that phenomenon, and help ensure that the leadership of those who are too quick to say they're "just" something is recognized by others, and by themselves.

Recently I was reminded how some of the most powerful people in our lives can fail to recognize just how important they are.

I've been incredibly lucky to be able to travel around the world and share ideas with audiences of all kinds. However, I've never been more nervous prior to a presentation than I was this past March, when I was invited back to speak at my old high school. Because I don't care who you are, or how accomplished you've become: as soon as you walk through the doors of your old high school, you revert back to the person you were in high school. And let's just say high school wasn't the easiest time in the world for me!

However, there was someone who made my difficult time at high school a little bit easier: a man by the name of Mr. Kiff. Mr. Kiff was the head custodian at our school, had been there for over 20 years, and was one of the most remarkably kind men with whom I have ever crossed paths. He knew every student's name; he was a friend to those who were bullied; he congratulated people on their athletic achievements and on their acceptance to universities. He even anonymously laid gifts and cards in front of lockers when people lost family members. He took tremendous pleasure in the growth and happiness of the people after whom he mopped up.

As I waited in the Principal's office before heading down to the presentation (an odd sensation at the age of 35), I was shocked to see Mr. Kiff spot me through the window, beeline into the office and embrace me in a huge hug. I told him I couldn't believe he remembered me after so many years, but that I had thought of him often, and was so grateful for what he had added to my life during what had often been a scary time.

"Aw," he said, "I'm just a janitor lucky enough to know you before you hit the big time."

"Just a janitor".

Our lives and workplaces are too full of amazing individuals like Mr. Kiff who think like that. Who have convinced themselves that they have no right to think of themselves as leaders because of what job they've ended up doing, or where in the corporate hierarchy they appear to have peaked. What's more, according to the social rules we've accepted, Mr. Kiff's perspective makes total sense. After all, I'd worked hard to get great grades and earn scholarships to good schools. I'd done the things necessary to win awards, get promotions, and eventually start my own company. I'd made a bunch of money. With every step in my career, there were fewer and fewer people like me. The rules say that makes me more valuable, and that's what he was acknowledging. Those rules convince us it makes more sense to chase money and titles than it does to chase what Mr. Kiff has achieved.

But what he has achieved needs to be better recognized. You see, thousands of students have walked the halls of my old high school. Thousands of them have become the friend of Mr. Kiff. They have gone on to be doctors and lawyers and CEOs – the people the rules say deserve our admiration and respect. And I bet you right now, if someone said Mr. Kiff's name in one of their offices, each one of them would smile.

We have come to believe that our value is measured by how well we become one of the few. Our lives and our organizations are filled with leaders who have adopted that perspective, and as such, refuse to acknowledge their role as leaders. What if we all worked to create a culture where it is recognized that the true measure of our life is how many people smile when our name is spoken twenty years after they last saw us? What if we could aim to live a life, and create workplaces, where that objective is advanced as our primary motivation?

How do we identify and recognize the unsung leaders in our lives and organizations? I do it by asking this question: If I was not permitted to consider, wealth, position, or prestige--if those things were no longer part of the equation – who would I look up to? Whose life would I envy?

For me, it would be Mr. Kiff's.

I think it's important that when we identify the people in our lives and organizations who are living their lives in a way that impresses us, we take a moment to let them know they are leaders to us. Not just tell them that we value them, or that what they do matters, or that we care about them...but that they are *leaders* to us.

Leadership recognized is leadership created, and creating leadership is living leadership.

And that's not just a little thing.

Four of those questions are designed to add value to other people, two of them will add value in your own life. Ensuring you answer all six every day guarantees a minimum of 2190 "value adding" actions each year. No one who adds that kind of value is anything but a leader.

4. Don't let people live rent free in your head

One of the most powerful ways to ensure you answer the final question above ("What have I done today to be good to myself?") is to adopt this particular philosophy, and encourage those you work with to do the same.

This particular insight came from the last place I expected: from a day in the desert, and my guide for that day: Mustafa.

I met Mustafa on an 83 degree December afternoon. He was leaning against the hood of a Land Cruiser outside my hotel in downtown Doha, Qatar. He flashed a dazzling smile as I approached, and pumped my hand enthusiastically as he welcomed me to "Mustafa's grand adventure!"

I was three months out from having quit my job at the University of Toronto. I was broke but happy; optimistic but nervous. The future looked bright, but the present was still darkened by the challenging personal conflict that had led to my departure from a job I had honestly loved. I was thrilled to be on my first international speaking tour, but the uncertainty of the future, and the still-fresh hurt of the recent past seemed intent on keeping me in a perpetual state of unease.

But Mustafa was having none of that. As we pulled away from the hotel and started heading to the outskirts of the city, Mustafa's infectious energy overcame me. He wanted to know everything about where I was from, what I was doing in Qatar, and what I was "dreaming of learning from the desert". I admired his constant stream of laughter and smiles, and finally asked him how he stayed so upbeat.

"It's my first day of work!" He exclaimed happily.

Now, bear in mind this man's job was to take me "dune blasting" through the Middle Eastern desert, before helping me stay alive through the night in said desert. While I'm all for optimism and energy, I was hoping for a bit of experience as well.

“Um...it’s your first day?” I asked nervously.

“Of course!” He replied. “It’s always my first day! It’s been my first day for 18 years!”

He laughed at my confusion and explained: “I go to work every day like it’s my first day. On your first day of work you dress your best, you listen the hardest, you are nice to everyone that you work with. On your first day you work to impress your new bosses and your new coworkers, and you hope and believe it will be a job you love. But we let that all start to go away on our second day.”

He winked at me and continued.

“I decided 18 years ago I would not have a second day of work. I decided I would just redo my first. I have been redoing it every day since then. I am blessed to do what I love, and I think that is the best way to keep loving it.”

Oddly enough, at that moment his remarkably positive insight depressed me. It reminded me of how much I had still wanted to accomplish at my old job. It reminded me of all the grand plans I would never get the chance to execute now that I was gone. I began to think of the person I held responsible for that loss, and my anger grew as I fell silent next to Mustafa.

We drove quietly for a few miles before Mustafa quietly asked, “Are you not having a good time?”

Not wanting to upset someone who was working so hard to provide a great experience, I shared with Mustafa my anger at my former boss, and the events that had unfolded to create that anger.

He drove silently for a few moments before quietly saying, “Drew, this person you speak of is so far away. You are here, in this remarkable place, on this grand adventure. She is so far away that it is day here, and night there. But you’re not letting it be day here. You are letting someone who is not even here make you angry, make you sad, and wreck your adventure. What is worse, you think it is her fault.”

“It is her fault!” I protested.

Mustafa shook his head. “No my friend, it is not. Because it is you who have chosen to let someone live rent-free in your head and in your heart. A landlord may allow people to use his property, but he charges rent to protect his investment. You are the landlord of your mind and your heart. They are your most valuable property. To allow someone to live there they must provide you with something valuable in return. Sadness and hatred are not valuable to you. To let someone in who gives only those is to allow them to live rent free in your head and your heart.”

He glanced over at me. “The landlord sets the rent. He cannot be angry when he is paid only what he asked for.”

5. Heal

I once had a young woman approach me after a presentation where I had shared the stories of some friends I had lost. She told me, “Drew, I’m so sorry for the pain you’ve had to deal with in your life.”

She then proceeded to tell me her own story. A story that involved the loss of both her parents and grandparents in her war-torn home. When she was finished, I asked her, “How can you say you are sorry for the pain I have had to deal with, when your’s dwarfs mine?”

She smiled and said, “Drew, I’ve discovered there is no universal measuring unit for pain. Hurt just hurts. But only hurt people hurt others. If I want to be someone who doesn’t hurt the people I love, I have to find a way to let go of the things that have hurt me.”

“Only hurt people hurt others” - what a powerful insight.

I’m 35 years old, and I have been to 15 of my friends’ funerals, and 5 of their weddings. That’s a truly unfortunate 3:1 ratio. As such, I’ve lost too many friends in ways that I cannot control to not tell anyone who will listen this one piece of advice: if you can save a relationship by saying “I’m sorry” or by hearing “I’m sorry”, do it. There is no weakness in forgiveness. In fact, I believe that leadership begins where forgiveness begins.

Everyone in this room has someone that isn’t in your life anymore that you wish was, and the only reason they are not is that you haven’t said “I’m sorry”, or heard “I’m sorry”. That’s letting something live rent-free in your head. It’s adding something to your shoulders. It’s holding on to something that hurts you, but more importantly, is going to at some point hurt someone that you care about.

One of the big reasons we don’t let go of things however? Because we want to feel like we’ve “won”. Leaders “win” right? I think that’s a flawed bit of reasoning. In my experience, the most successful leaders aren’t interested in “winning”, they’re interested in succeeding. Sometimes our desire to win stands in the way of our true success.

We can’t lead effectively until we at least try to heal.

6. Remember that little steps can leave big footprints

The presentation will close with a return to the concept of “Lollipop Moments”, with a reminder that while we cannot plan for those moments, we can commit ourselves to certain perspectives and practices that make it more likely we will create them.

Following the “Leading with Lollipops” story appearing on TED.com, people began to email me their own “Lollipop Moments”, some of which were extremely powerful. I will share one of these stories to close. It reconnects the idea of “Lollipop Moments” to the idea that leadership is making one big decision to make a series of consistent, positive, small decisions.

I grew up in the suburbs, and had always been afraid of the “big city”. But I got a great job just out of college and had to move to Chicago. Driving home from work on my first day, I saw a homeless man on the median, moving down the row of cars with a coffee cup, hoping for change. I had never actually seen a homeless person before, and I actually panicked about what to do as he came closer. Somehow he sensed this, smiled, and said through my closed window: “Don’t worry newbie – you just smile, wave, and tell me ‘not today my friend’. You’ll get used to this place – it hasn’t beaten me, and it won’t beat you!”

He then smiled and moved to the next car.

The next day, he was there at the same median as I drove home. As he came towards me he smiled and shouted out, “feeling at home yet!?” I smiled, waved, and dropped a dollar in his cup.

This became a tradition for me and the man I came to discover was named Larry. I’d save a dollar or two from my morning coffee, and stick it in his cup as I drove by at the end of the day. Each day he’d smile and ask me, “big city ain’t beat you yet has it?” And I’d laugh and tell him “not yet!”

One day, about a year later, I held a dollar out as Larry approached, only to see him shake his head and wave it away.

“You know my man,” he said. “You’ve given me a buck every day for a year now, when most of these people drive right on by. You’ve done your share. You keep it today.”

I don’t really know why the idea struck me at that moment...maybe it was knowing that so many people were ignoring this kind man...but I reached into my wallet, yanked out three twenties, and held them out to him.

“I want to do some of their share too.” I said.

He stared at the money, then at me for a moment. Then he nodded, silently took the money, and moved on.

Two years later, I was driving by that familiar intersection with a woman in the passenger seat. It was only our third date, but I had never felt about anyone the way I felt about her. I was terrified I was somehow going to screw it up.

As we stopped at the red light, Larry waved and moved towards the car. As he got to the window, he leaned in and smiled at my date.

“My name’s Larry,” he said. “I’m betting this guy sitting here is one of the few people in the world who knows that...or cares. You should know though, that he’s given me exactly \$1324.68 since I first saw him scared out of his mind at this intersection three years ago. One day he gave

me sixty bucks. It made me feel like a friend instead of a charity case. He's a special man, and you're lucky to be out with him."

On our first anniversary, my wife told me that was the moment she knew she was going to marry me.