



## Anatomy of a Successful Leader - Crossing the Bridge



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**Leadership skills are acquired skills. Certain traits are useful but that is minimum pay to play. I have found there is a bridge to cross to become a leader. Leaders go through three stages: dependency (learning), independence (wake-up call), and interdependency (nirvana). Most leaders never move beyond independence.**

**Stage One: Dependence.** School teaches you how to think. Education rarely provides you with an understanding of leadership responsibility. Upon graduation you are useless in the workplace; hired for potential and not skills. At this stage, all work is given to you and hopefully, you have selected good mentors or a job where you can learn. Your goal here is to read and learn. As Harry Truman said, "Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers". Reading about perfecting your craft is different than reading some useless textbook in college. Focusing on learning technical skills and observing leadership behavior, situations, and how they were handled. This is the nesting stage – getting ready to launch. Also, if you want to be a leader your goal in these first seven years is not to make as much money as you can (that will come). Rather, it is to learn skills and soak up other people's styles so that you can learn the right and the wrong approaches to leadership. Jumping from job to job for a few extra dollars or working at home in your pajamas all day is not going to get you there. Most people at this stage are selfish, growing up and finding themselves as adults, a phrase one of my daughters describes as "adulting" (love it!). If you waste this time rather than adulting, you will pay a price. Play hard for sure, but also work hard at this stage. Mail it in at this stage and it puts you so far behind the 8 ball you may never catch up because the next stage adds new challenges.

**Stage Two: Independence.** In your mid-30s, things may get complicated. You might find a life partner, have children and more distractions on your time come into play besides learning skills. You work hard at this stage but do so purposefully and intentionally. Working all the time and "never having time for your life" is the surest sign of incompetency or failure to launch in Stage One. One must learn to prioritize and embrace time management, an essential leadership skill at this stage. If you have learned the lion's share of technical skills earlier, you may feel like you can behave more independently and not rely so heavily on learning fundamental skills. You may engage more with clients or customers on your own. You might be feeling good about your capabilities just when the stakes are getting higher and different skills are now required.

People are often put into leadership roles for excellent individual achievement and foolishly believe they have nothing else to learn. Many organizations do not prepare leaders for this stage. For the enlightened leader, you may begin to realize that *"What Got You Here Won't Get You There"*, a famous book by Marshall Goldsmith. Having mastered the subject matter of the area in which you work, you now need new relational and "soft" skills. These are the superpowers of an advancing leader or the last stop on the train for most leaders. At the same time, you need to learn to get a better balance in managing the emotions of family, children, peers, or subordinates. Your friends will also be moving into these positions so you must make time for nurturing networking, company politics, and diplomacy. Don't wait too long to build your network. Special relationships are built by leaders who are emerging at the same time. They keep you challenged and become an informal advisory board. Their network becomes yours. Leaders need external networks, or they are limited by the echo chamber of their companies. Here the mastery of time management, understanding who you are, and your ability to obtain emotional intelligence and followership is the difference between moving on to Stage 3 or being stuck here. We all know this stuck person. They stepped on everyone's head while they were climbing the corporate ladder, have few relationships, family is an afterthought, and they do not trust anyone but themselves. They don't cross the bridges; they burn them. Chaos follows them like a puppy. They just want to be called the "boss" without understanding the responsibilities that come with that title. This self-limiting behavior is 90% of leaders. For those who jumped around from job to job to follow a few dollars, learned nothing, worked in their pajamas for the last 10 years, etc., they will begin to flatten out financially and never see their own short-sightedness in this journey nor realize it is time for them to pay the toll to cross that bridge that they skipped before – the modern victim a/k/a the transactional leader.

**Stage 3: Interdependency.** This is the nirvana of leadership. This stage of leadership is all about accomplishing great things, impactful things, through *other* people. This is where the introspective journey kicks into high gear. You create other leaders. You embrace what makes people tick and nurture others. You inspire others to be great – better than you. You are the organizer and take part in building great teams. Yes, there is politics and learning how to play in the sandbox here, but politics (self-awareness and emotional intelligence) is not equal to being what we describe today as a "politician". A politician craves power for selfish reasons; a leader wants connectedness to do great things for others beyond the leader. Connectedness and the ability to harness it among people other than yourself is truly what a leader should aspire to become. Your standard of leadership of yourself determines how everyone you lead will behave. At this stage, you are learning how to obtain a mastery over connectedness with family, friends, colleagues, and organizations.

This is a long journey (I am still on it). The deliberate and intentional steps you take to get there do matter. I hope this helps someone in the middle of their journey or just beginning. Cross that bridge and then pay it forward.