

The Evolution of My Leadership Identity

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Introduction

“Success is the product of daily habits, not once-in-a-lifetime transformations.”

—James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (2018)

Every leader walks a path that is anything but predictable. Mine has often followed the road less traveled, filled with highs, setbacks, service, and hard resets. From a quiet moment of personal reflection in high school to rebuilding after professional loss, my leadership evolution has been shaped by pivotal life events.

This narrative explores key turning points in my leadership journey, from youth and early career experiences to volunteer service, crisis leadership, and a return to formal education. Along the way, I connect these real-world moments with established leadership frameworks like Transformational, Authentic, Servant, and Situational Leadership. Each story reflects not only who I was at the time, but who I’ve become and continue to become, through ongoing self-awareness and intentional growth.

Key Leadership Moments and Their Theoretical Connections

Journeys bring both joy and hardship.

A Life-Changing Conversation. The Power of Positive Thinking

One of the most defining moments in my leadership journey happened during my sophomore year in high school. My best friend, Sean, and I were walking home, engaged in conversation when he suddenly said, "Jimmy, you are such a pessimist." At the time, I had no clue what the word meant. Sean was incredibly intelligent, a year ahead of me in school and later accepted into West Point. When I asked him for clarification, he simply

told me to look it up. When I did, I was devastated. It was a slap in the face. I had been involved in Boy Scouts and was learning about leadership, but this realization forced me to reassess my mindset. Determined to change, I went to the library and found *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale. This book transformed me. This shift aligned with Transformational Leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), as I changed my perspective and inspired others through my actions. From then on, I committed to a more optimistic outlook, which profoundly impacted my achievements. I went from being an average student to earning straight A's. My senior year, I became the wrestling team captain. I also took two trips to Philmont Scout Reservation, hiking over 150 miles in 14 days as the crew leader. This shift aligned with Transformational Leadership, as I changed my perspective and inspired others through my actions.

The Value of Hard Work Early Career Leadership

In college (a two-year trade school in electronics), I worked at a grocery store as a clerk and stock clerk. When the dairy manager left, I took over his duties despite only working four hours a day. I became the new dairy manager, demonstrating initiative and responsibility beyond my job title. This was my first experience in Situational Leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), adapting my approach based on circumstances and the needs of the business.

My first job after college saw rapid growth. Within two years, I advanced to lead technician. I then took a leap of faith, moving to Kansas City to start a new office selling and servicing financial equipment. The owner told me he could afford to pay me for only

six months unless I could bring in business. I took the challenge head-on, and 14 years later, I left that company with ten employees in our Kansas City office. This experience reinforced Authentic Leadership (George, 2003), where self-awareness, resilience, and a clear sense of purpose drive success. This experience reinforced Authentic Leadership, where self-awareness, resilience, and a clear sense of purpose drive success. However, in hindsight, I also recognized that authentic leadership requires more than just showing up consistently, it demands openness in failure and vulnerability with your team. Early in my career, I often masked uncertainty with confidence, not realizing that transparency could strengthen, rather than weaken, trust.

Serving the Community Volunteer Leadership

Leadership extends beyond professional life. For 20 years, I volunteered as a firefighter, serving the last eight years as a lieutenant and captain. This role required Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), where putting others first and making sacrifices were essential to the mission.

Additionally, as a Scoutmaster for my son's troop, I started with 15 boys, but by my last year, we took 50 people to summer camp. Over the years, I helped 40 young men earn their Eagle Scout rank. This experience highlighted Transformational Leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006), as I mentored young individuals, guiding them toward self-reliance and leadership of their own.

The Crash and the Reboot, A Hard Reset

In 2010, life was rolling. I was working for the company I had always dreamed of, one that gave me autonomy and trust. I felt like I was on top of the world. But on November 10th, one phone call changed everything. The company had undergone a management

change, and suddenly, the sales team was to blame for all the issues. Just like that, I was out of a job. I had no real goals at that moment, just plans for lunch and who I was meeting with.

Looking back, I had been coasting, going through the motions, riding the wave. The following year was a complete reboot. Waking up without a job, a plan, or even a clear direction was disorienting. I had to reevaluate everything, my life, my situation, my goals. Thankfully, I had a substantial 401(k) that gave me breathing room to survive. Within a month, I landed a straight-commission sales job, but it lacked any real potential. In March, I resigned and set out to find the right fit.

By May, I found a position in an industry I was familiar with. It was essentially starting over, but this time with clarity. That season taught me a lot about resilience, resolve, and the strength of my support network. I now understand how adversity sharpens leadership. I'm stronger because of it, and if the same thing happened today, I would face it with far more wisdom and preparedness.

Crisis Management Leading Through Adversity

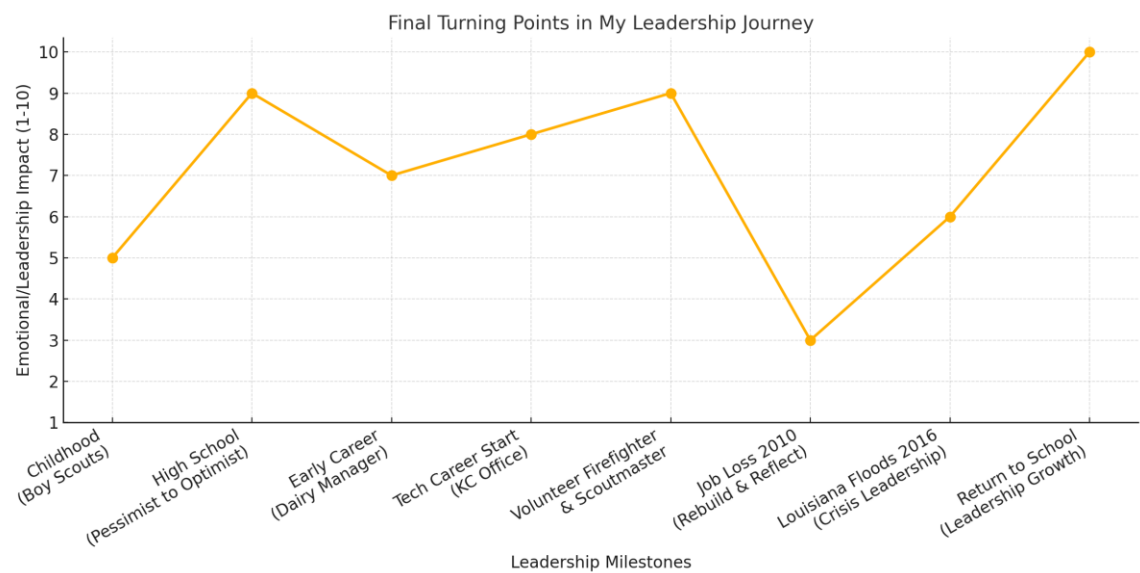
In 2016, when the Louisiana floods devastated businesses, including the company I worked with, I faced an immense challenge. The organization needed leadership to stabilize operations and rebuild trust. I adopted a Transformational Leadership approach, inspiring resilience in the team, fostering adaptability, and focusing on a long-term vision. This experience reinforced that strong leadership isn't about control but about instilling confidence and guiding others through uncertainty.

The Decision to Return to School Leading by Example

A deeply personal leadership decision was returning to school to complete my degree. I had always regretted not finishing my formal education, and when the opportunity arose, I took it. This journey aligns with Authentic Leadership (George, 2003), where self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency define leadership. By openly sharing my challenges and growth mindset, I demonstrated to my peers and mentees that leadership is about continuous improvement.

Turning Points Graph

The graph below illustrates the key turning points in my leadership journey from childhood to present day.



Conclusion

My leadership identity has been forged through a lifetime of lessons, some earned in triumph, others in trial. From a high school conversation that reshaped my mindset, to

professional success, volunteer leadership, devastating setbacks, and powerful comebacks, each chapter has refined who I am as a leader.

The 2010 crash was a turning point. It taught me that comfort can breed complacency, and that sometimes we need to be shaken to truly grow. Losing everything I had built professionally forced me to reflect, regroup, and rebuild, not just my career, but my purpose. I learned the value of resolve, the strength of a support network, and the importance of aligning goals with meaning.

These experiences, combined with a return to school later in life, have deepened my understanding of leadership as an evolving, adaptive practice. Theories like Transformational, Authentic, Situational, and Servant Leadership aren't just academic, they are frameworks I've lived through.

Today, I lead with more empathy, resilience, and self-awareness than ever before. I understand that leadership isn't about titles or control, it's about service, growth, and the ability to rise, rebuild, and help others do the same. The journey has shaped me, and I wouldn't trade any part of it. It made me the leader I am, and the one I continue striving to become.

That season of starting over was just one more point in my life along the path of Robert Frost's timeless words in *The Road Not Taken*:

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference." (Frost, 1916)

Choosing to rebuild my career with intention, rather than returning to the same path, was my version of the road less traveled. It shaped not just my job, but my identity as a leader.

I plan to include this narrative in my e-portfolio. It is a meaningful representation of my leadership journey, and I believe it showcases my growth, values, and lessons learned over the years.

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