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Motivation, The Leadership Activator

The Movement Toward Leadership

Leadership is a journey that begins with a decision to act. It is an internal shift that results in external action. From a position of passively accepting events that unfold on their own, you move to actively exert influence over the events at hand. Initially, you may feel very tentative and unsure. Perhaps you compare yourself unfavorably to your role models, people who have made a difference in the social service field, or politicians or religious figures. Whoever they are, you see these role models as more advanced or capable than you; you doubt you have anything to offer in the leadership arena. Or perhaps it is just not in your personality to be proactive. You'd rather wait for someone else to take the lead and then you are perfectly willing to help out. Maybe up until now you've sat back and waited for others to take action, complaining, perhaps, about your powerlessness. But then something happens and, in spite of your doubts, you find yourself taking that step.

There are a variety of circumstances that contribute to the movement toward leadership. Perhaps you have supported others whose leadership has not been effective. After giving them the benefit of the doubt, you realize that not only is nothing positive happening, but you could (possibly) do a better job. So you decide to step forward. Or maybe you are frustrated that no one seems to be exercising leadership. Over time, your frustration becomes a stronger force than your hesitation. Maybe you've had the unfortunate experience of affiliating yourself with people whose leadership turned out to be in pursuit of ends you don't support. As a result, you decide it's time for you to move into a more active leadership role on behalf of issues you do support. It's also possible that, like me, you were recruited into a leadership role rather than volunteering.

In the late 1970s, I was approached by a manager affiliated with the local office of the Department of Mental Retardation. He asked whether I would be interested in creating a new residential agency that would serve four teenaged girls with multiple disabilities who were living at a nearby institution, Belchertown State School. The state had put out requests for proposals several times and none of the existing community service providers had bid on the contract.

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Although I had worked with people with mental retardation for several years, I had virtually no management or leadership experience. I was only twenty-four years old. To this day, I cannot say with certainty what motivated me to accept the challenge. I know I was caught up in the excitement of the times: de-institutionalization was in full swing and the community service system was expanding rapidly. There was a sense of mission, righteousness, and solidarity among the proponents of de-institutionalization. On a practical level, the state manager promised extensive support from his office while I was developing the skills I needed to create and manage an agency. But no previous experiences had prepared me to form a nonprofit corporation, purchase and renovate a residence so it would be wheelchair accessible, develop policies and procedures, hire and supervise staff, set up and manage the agency's finances, or ensure that we provided high quality services to the young women. If I had truly known what was entailed, I probably would not have accepted the challenge. And yet, having worked at Belchertown State School while in college, I had a serious commitment to helping people move out of institutions and create their own homes in the community. In spite of deep reservations about my preparedness for the role, I felt a strong motivation to take on the leadership challenge offered to me.

Since that time, I've had numerous opportunities to exercise leadership, formally and informally. In spite of over thirty years of experience and increased confidence in my own capabilities, I still confront new challenges with trepidation. What supports me is my motivation to address a situation or need that has an impact on people's lives.

Sources of Motivation

"Virginia" is another example of someone who didn't go looking for a leadership role. Although many professionals and family members identify her as a role model, she doesn't think of herself that way. Mother of a daughter with disabilities, over the years "Virginia" has taken on increasingly expansive leadership roles in her state. She founded a local family leadership organization along with a leadership training series. In addition, she was a founder of the statewide family organization that shepherded the passage of legislation requiring agencies serving people with disabilities to consult with families to coordinate support services for their clients. This legislation, informally called the Family Support Bill, took eleven years to pass and required unceasing advocacy to bring it to fruition. "Virginia" is a top leader of an agency serving people with mental retardation, along with her husband. In their spare time, she and her husband provide consultation to other family groups. In spite of these numerous leadership roles, when I asked "Virginia" what led her to become a leader, she said "You find yourself in various roles that other people would say are leadership when you are motivated by something that's very personal. It's all about my daughter. How could I do any less? If it moves from helping her to something that helps other people, that's an accident. It's not what I would have chosen. I'd rather be in my garden or baking every single day. But I can't fulfill my role as her mother in any other way than what I'm doing. I have a tremendous

desire to see the world change for all people with disabilities because my daughter is always in jeopardy. If other people are not in a good situation, it's harder for her to have a good life." "Virginia's" motivation to act on behalf of her daughter provides her with a sense of urgency: Mediocre is insufficient, tomorrow is too late.

Many other family members, as well as people with disabilities and their allies, share "Virginia's" perspective on leadership. They did not take on leadership roles because of an inner drive to lead. Instead, external circumstances reached into them, connected with a deep source of motivation, and pulled them forward. The story of Rosa Parks, the woman who became a powerful symbol during the Civil Rights Movement, is a good example of this dynamic. You may recall that she was a middle-aged seamstress on her way home from work in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955. Ms Parks decided to do something that was both illegal and culturally unacceptable in that racist society, and was also very dangerous: she sat down in the front of a bus in a seat reserved for whites. The story is often told that she sat down because she was "tired." Yes, that is what she told others when asked what her motivation to act had been. However, the full meaning of "tired" needs further explanation. You see, Rosa Parks was not just a middle-aged seamstress. She was also well trained in the theory and tactics of nonviolence and had studied in the company of Martin Luther King. She was secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, where they had also discussed nonviolence. Ms Parks' "tiredness" was not only physical, it was also spiritual. In the words of Parker Palmer, she was tired of "act(ing) on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside." In other words, external circumstances reached into her, and took hold of a deep source of motivation. In her case, as Palmer asserts, she wished to live a life "divided no more."

Based on this understanding, I want to put forward a fundamental point of this monograph: Wherever you are on your leadership journey, motivation is the central element. It is the stimulus, the activator of leadership. It's the switch that enables you to make the internal shift described above, the start of your leadership journey. Once you begin that journey, the necessary skills can be acquired, borrowed or shared. Although personal traits such as organization and charisma are useful in the exercise of leadership, they are not central. What can't be borrowed, at least initially, is motivation. You really need to have a strong reason to take that first step.

Let's start by looking at the word "motivation." Take a minute to think about how you would define it. Is it willpower: the act of mentally toughening yourself to act in ways that do not come naturally? Or is it passion, that strong energy that wipes away all impediments? Motivation, defined as "drive" or "incentive," will be experienced differently by different people. But its core function is the same: to get you moving. It's the fuel, the juice, the energy that gets you started and sustains you. And I guarantee that you can have all the potential in the world to be a leader, but if you lack motivation you will never get out of the starting gate.

There are two fundamental sources of motivation to lead. The first is what I would characterize as “constitutional motivation.” These are people with an inner urge to lead: they are driven to exercise leadership and would do so in virtually any context. For example, there is an experiential exercise that I use in some of my leadership courses called “Evacuation Drill.” Its premise is that the group is faced with an immanent threat and needs to evacuate their current location immediately. The group is charged with the task of planning a move to a remote location for an indeterminate length of time. They have ten minutes to plan their evacuation; each person is allowed to bring one item from their current location that they believe to be essential to their survival. The group must then plan their trip. The point of this exercise is to examine how people organize themselves to accomplish a task when they are under stress, and to explore the leadership patterns that emerge.

Inevitably, one or two people immediately step forward and begin to organize the rest of the group. Initially, other members of the group gravitate toward those individuals, no matter what they propose. As additional proposals are made, a plan begins to take shape. The people who initially step forward are often these constitutional leaders, individuals who have the inner drive to lead whenever there is a void. However, along with the constitutional motivation to lead, there are other motivations as well. In the Evacuation Drill exercise, there are individuals whose voices emerge gradually, perhaps motivated by a strong sense of what’s right or by concern for the well-being of the group. These voices blend with those of others and can play a pivotal role in determining the course of action. While their leadership is usually more subtle, it still has a decisive impact.

This is the second source of motivation, what I would characterize as “situational motivation.” For example, some people—and many family members and people with disabilities fall into this category—take on leadership roles because they are directly affected by the issues at stake. There is something about their situation or that of a family member that needs to be improved. It’s very possible that they would never have become a leader without that source of motivation, as “Virginia” acknowledged. I call these people “reluctant leaders.” One mother of a child with disabilities told a group of other family members that she had no interest in exercising leadership until well after her child was born. She said, “My husband and I were on a career track. We wanted to have it all: good jobs, a beautiful home, nice cars. Even after Andrew was born, I held onto that dream. But at some point I realized that if he was going to have a decent life, and if we were going to do okay as a family, I had to put that energy into advocating for him instead of acquiring more possessions. It was hard to change gears but I had no choice.” People motivated to exercise leadership by external circumstances initially may not think of themselves as leaders. For example, at first this mother did not think of her actions on behalf of her son as “leadership.” Instead, she saw herself as just doing what needed to be done. In her mind, “leadership” was something dramatic and decisive, a kind of “command and control” approach that had been shaped by her experience as a manager in a hierarchical company. Over time, as a result of taking part in leadership training and being mentored by other parent leaders, she began to see her actions as

leadership. This transition is common to many people who exercise leadership reluctantly. At some point in their journey, such people go from “just doing what needs to be done” to making a commitment to exercise leadership. Such a commitment does not need to be an intellectual one. Sometimes a commitment of the heart is made before the mind even knows it.

In addition to those people motivated to exercise leadership because circumstances directly affect them, there are also people motivated to exercise leadership because they identify with those who are directly affected. Perhaps they have heard compelling stories of injustice, or known people who experienced discrimination. Such people may feel a sense of interconnectedness with others, and be moved to take leadership out of a sense of compassion. Many allies of people with disabilities and their families are motivated in this way. Sometimes, this is viewed by those directly affected as suspect or inauthentic. After all, why would anyone who didn't have to address these issues do so voluntarily? I once had to defend my commitment to supporting people with psychiatric disabilities to have a voice, having been challenged by one of the leaders in the psychiatric survivors' movement. He questioned my motivation and my authenticity. Although it was painful at the time, it compelled me to clearly articulate my own personal stake and point of identification with the people I was working for. This, in turn, strengthened my own motivation because I realized that I was as personally affected as if it were my own voice that was being suppressed, and that it could well be my voice in another context. In his book *Longing for Home*, Frederick Buechner speaks to this motivation: "We carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home... But woe to us if we forget the homeless ones who have no vote, no power, nobody to lobby for them, who might as well have no faces... To be really at home is to be really at peace and our lives so intrinsically interwoven that there can be no peace for any of us until there is real peace for all of us."

Just as I was writing about this source of motivation, my friend and colleague Karlene called. She is a paragon of compassion. She spends her life working on behalf of others: driving people to church, working in a human service agency, serving on myriad committees, teaching classes. In addition to her unstinting service, she has also played many leadership roles. She was moderator at her church for a number of years, she serves on multiple nonprofit boards, and she has initiated several projects that promote the integration of people with disabilities into their communities. When I asked her why she was motivated to exercise leadership she replied, "I don't even see it as leadership. It's a natural reaction that comes from an underlying desire to be helpful. I meet a person and right away I know someone else who could be helpful to them... I have gotten to personally know so many people with disabilities and I have seen first hand how their lives can get so much better with a little help from others." For Karlene, exercising leadership satisfies her deep desire to be helpful.

What are *your* sources of motivation? It's time to begin identifying the inner and outer fuel for your own leadership journey. Whether you are a person just starting on the path or someone who is well-seasoned, there are factors that invite and sustain you. Spend a minute reflecting on these questions:

1. Why exercise leadership?
2. Why not exercise leadership?
3. Of the above, which are the most powerful reasons—for me—in favor of leading?
4. Of the above, which are the most powerful reasons—for me—against leading?

You might also want to spend some time talking with family members, friends and colleagues about your answers to these questions as they may have useful perspectives on your sources of motivation.

I have asked these questions at leadership workshops. We usually begin by identifying some of the reasons NOT to lead, of which there are many. Sometimes the reasons not to lead seem stronger and more compelling than the reasons to lead. When you reflect on all the possible obstacles to leadership, the importance of motivation becomes even clearer.

Reasons Not to Lead

Self-doubt is perhaps the biggest impediment to leadership. The prospect of exercising leadership can be intimidating, scary, and anxiety-provoking. People often fear being unfavorably compared to a set of traits they believe are prerequisites for leadership, even if they have never consciously thought it through. Because of this self-doubt, leadership may be viewed as someone else's job--someone decisive, charismatic and organized perhaps. Self-doubt can be a powerful impediment to the exercise of leadership because it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: If someone doubts himself to the point where he fails to exercise leadership, then he will not gain the necessary experience that might increase his confidence. At one leadership event, a participant asked how she might develop the confidence to exercise leadership. She said she had often taken one step forward, then questioned herself, and taken two steps back. She described a pattern of acting with conviction in response to a compelling need, then becoming frozen with self-doubt about the action she had taken, and consequently undoing her first confident action. We talked about what was causing her to question herself and discovered that it came from her belief that there was a "right way" to act that was unknown to her. We also talked about the fact that her backtracking was causing more harm than moving forward imperfectly would have. In response to her question about developing confidence, my best advice was, "fake it, keep moving forward, and learn from your actions."

A variation on the theme of self-doubt is the belief that leaders have to know the answers in order to lead. The leadership job description that many of us carry around in our heads includes "knowing the answers" as one important duty. Actually, "knowing the answers" is not a leadership requirement, and it may actually prevent one from acting as skillfully as possible by enabling others to avoid taking responsibility, suppressing creative thinking and keeping others at a distance. However, because we often think of leaders as the people with the answers, feeling like we don't have the answers can prevent us from stepping forward.

Believing that leadership can (or should) only be exercised by someone with a formal position or title is another perceived reason not to lead. Like the reasons described above, this perception works against the development of capabilities and experiences that contribute to a person becoming an effective leader, whether they have a title or not. It also places responsibility and power in the hands of another party. All three of these reasons spring from one common cause: a set of assumptions (our unconscious job description) about the skills, duties and prerequisites for being a leader.

Speaking of assumptions, another reason not to lead is the belief that no intervention could change the course of events. Our taken-for-granted beliefs about how change occurs play a significant role in determining whether we try to influence what is happening around us. If we believe that events are pre-determined, then we may be inclined to play a passive role. Sometimes, passivity is the result of self-doubt, but it can also come from a deeper set of beliefs about how the world operates. For example, you might believe that the past determines the future. Psychologist Martin Seligman writes, "Do you believe your past determines your future? This is not an idle question of philosophical theory. To the extent that you believe that the past determines the future, you will tend to allow yourself to be a passive vessel that does not actively change its course. Such beliefs are responsible for magnifying many people's inertia." Any belief that minimize the potential for humans to influence events is likely to be an impediment to the exercise of leadership.

Another reason not to lead is an array of overwhelming responsibilities: caring for a child who has a disability, trying to advocate for quality education, tending to the needs of other family members, holding down a job. Often one's own individual situation is challenging enough, without taking on broader leadership roles. One mother, Diane, talked about how she had gone from viewing her family's situation as their own individual responsibility to realizing that, if families joined together, they could positively influence the circumstances of the whole. She described that realization as the beginning of her leadership journey. But there are points in everyone's life when the prospect of taking on broader responsibilities is just impossible to imagine. During those times, it might be comforting to remember that even when you are caring for one person, you can practice the work of leadership. That's another of those misperceptions that gets in the way of many people exercising leadership: that it has to be on a large scale to be considered leadership. One mother of two children with autism told the story of how her son had been treated disrespectfully by the gym teacher at his school. Her response? To advocate that training on autism be conducted with all the school personnel. Not only was the intervention designed to address her son's situation, but it had the added benefit of affecting all the students with autism who attended that school.

Lack of support, cooperation, or appreciation are also reasons why people avoid taking on leadership roles. One parent talked about her efforts to start a Parent Advisory Council for their school system. She spent an entire year trying to recruit families to attend monthly meetings. Every month, the same small group showed up. When they sent out surveys, the surveys came back with great

suggestions and encouragement for the PAC to continue and even grow. However, few people were willing to help out. We did an analysis of what this parent had done to recruit a wider array of people to play active roles within the PAC and came up with a plan for the next year. Shortly after that, she told me she had resigned from her leadership position because she was tired of the lack of support. This is not an uncommon situation in volunteer efforts and it can be a very strong reason why people refuse to take leadership.

Some people are uncomfortable with the prospect of separating themselves from the group in order to assume a leadership role. They describe the experience as lonely. Although exercising leadership can involve leaving the safety of the group and distinguishing oneself, it's often the stories we tell ourselves about how leaders need to behave that causes this concern. When we carry the notion that a leader always "goes before" her people, rather than "with," our fears of isolation and loneliness can be magnified. On the other hand, if you cannot bear to set yourself apart from the group, then perhaps responsible followership, and not leadership, is an appropriate role for you.

Another reason not to lead is the fear of losing what you have, whether it is income, status, security or relationship. This is a compelling reason to think hard about assuming a leadership role because the risks are real. As Heifetz and Linsky write in *Leadership on the Line*, "It is no wonder that when the myriad opportunities to exercise leadership call, you often hesitate. Anyone who has stepped out on the line, leading part or all of an organization, a community, or a family knows the personal and professional vulnerabilities. However gentle your style, however careful your strategy, however sure you may be that you are on the right track, leading is risky." And yet they encourage people to take leadership, stating, "...we believe that leadership, while perilous, is an enterprise worthy of the costs."

Fear of change is yet another reason not to take leadership. "Change" in this context can be internal or external. Assuming leadership when one has not previously done so involves changes in oneself—speaking out when one has hung back, acting assertively even when one feels hesitant, paying attention to the perspectives of the whole group rather than just one's own point of view. Assuming leadership also involves changes in relationships: as mentioned earlier, there is a kind of distinction that results from taking on leadership roles in even the most egalitarian situations. And assuming leadership usually results in changes in the situation being addressed, or at least one intends that to happen. Almost by definition, leadership involves being in the midst of change, whether you are promoting or opposing it. People who have "issues" with change—inside or outside themselves-- may be reluctant to step into leadership roles.

These are some of the major reasons not to lead. Perhaps you have thought of others that are specific to you. Given all the factors working against leadership, why would anyone want to take on such roles?

Reasons to Lead

Probably the strongest reason to lead is that you feel a need and it is not being addressed. You see a situation that needs changing, whether it is in the life of one person or on a larger scale. A situation or need calling for leadership is probably the strongest motivator there is, especially if it's something you care deeply about.

There is an excellent exercise from a time management program I discovered years ago. Called the "I-beam exercise," it asks you to imagine you are at the top of a tall skyscraper. Across the way is another tall skyscraper. There is an I-beam (a narrow steel beam) suspended between the two. The facilitator asks, "Would you walk across this I-beam for \$10?" to which participants usually respond, "No way!" "How about \$100? \$1000? \$1,000,000?" He then raises the stakes by asking you to imagine that it is sleeting and the wind is blowing. "What would cause you to walk across this I-beam?" Usually the answer is someone or something that the person cares deeply about, and is powerfully motivated to act on behalf of. If you think of your leadership journey as a walk across that I-beam, then a situation or need that motivates you is your strongest reason to lead.

In my experience, it is very difficult to engage someone in a sustained commitment to a situation unless there is a strong heart-felt element to their motivation. It can't be at an intellectual level alone. Years ago, I organized a conference entitled, "Personal Commitment and Social Change." I clearly remember one interaction during the conference that crystallized this point: Philip Berrigan, well-known nuclear disarmament activist, had just finished a keynote presentation that compellingly described how he had been drawn to that particular issue. Psychiatric rights activist, Judi Chamberlin, stood up and challenged Berrigan to extend his commitment to people with psychiatric disabilities. Berrigan responded, not unreasonably, that if the world continued on its present path toward nuclear war, there would not be any people with psychiatric disabilities to advocate for. Chamberlin, unsatisfied with his logic, pressed her point. A standoff ensued. I was left feeling profoundly grateful that these two strong leaders had each made a commitment to a cause that was compelling to them and puzzled at their inability to recognize that each had a particular calling. It was clear that neither was going to recruit the other to "their" cause, even if it made sense logically.

There are other ancillary benefits to exercising leadership: to learn, to feel solidarity with others on the journey, to experience a sense of accomplishment, to teach others, to leave a legacy. These reasons are especially powerful motivators when they coincide with a compelling situation or need. If you find yourself in leadership roles that feel hollow or unsatisfying, it may be that you are getting some of these ancillary benefits without the added potency of being connected to a situation that engages you at a deep level. An overdeveloped sense of responsibility or duty can land you in such circumstances. There are far more compelling needs than there are leaders. Out of a sense of responsibility, we can find ourselves recruited to causes that do not resonate. This is not

necessarily a bad thing but you will have far more potency and sustainability if you are aligned with a situation that resonates.

Motivation is not a once and for all thing. It waxes and wanes by the day, depending on how you feel physically and emotionally. If you are going through a wrenching time personally, it's going to be challenging for you to stay motivated to run an advocacy group. That's natural. But motivation is like a touchstone: it's something you can go back to when you feel depleted or begin to question why you ever made the commitment to lead. The day "Virginia" and I spoke, she talked about how she felt overwhelmed and exhausted. She was worried about how she was going to gracefully fulfill the many commitments she had made. We talked for a long time about what was her deepest source of motivation, her daughter, and how she might arrange her schedule to spend more time with her. In the midst of a schedule so full of commitments that it was hard to come up for air, "Virginia" had accidentally lost her touchstone, her abiding source of motivation.

Maybe it is even helpful to have some kind of physical symbol of your motivation that you can see and feel when you are in that questioning mode. During the writing of this book, I taped up a photograph of a group of families with whom I regularly work. They encouraged me during my search for a publisher, and gave me confidence that I had an interested audience by affirming the usefulness of what I have to share. Their stories are a powerful motivator and the photograph reminds me of those stories. Whenever I lose momentum, I look at the picture and it re-energizes me.

Motivation also rubs off. Initially you may feel pretty lonely in your resolve but, as you move forward, you engage the motivation of others, which strengthens your own. Feeling responsible to other people is a powerful source of motivation. We create a web of responsibility that keeps us moving even when we'd really like to drop the ball. Scholar and consultant William Isaacs shared some of the lessons he'd learned from the Civil Rights movement, particularly about large-scale change. He commented on how momentum was created: it started small, with as few as two people and a sense of resonance with others. He stated, "Two makes an aperture, a microcosm of a shift." The creation of momentum through the joining together of small groups is the hallmark of any social movement: one can think of each person's motivation as being multiplied exponentially as they join together with others.

Our motivation can be especially strengthened if we feel we have a singular contribution to make, that there will be a void if we pull out. There is a wonderful story told by a colleague about a gentleman with mental retardation who was a member of the choir at his church. He received notification that he had won an award from a citizens group affiliated with the Department of Mental Retardation. He declined to attend the awards ceremony because it conflicted with choir practice. Upon hearing that, an official with the Department personally called the gentleman and pleaded with him to attend. Politely, but firmly, this man again declined, stating that he needed to be present at choir practice because "they need my voice." Even during those times when our motivation is put to the test, knowing that others need our voice can keep us engaged.

Once you start seeing the fruits of your leadership—motivation made manifest—your resolve is often strengthened. Those tentative first few steps in the direction of your aspiration become more and more confident. In the next chapter, we will focus on the task of identifying your aspiration: What are the purposes or aims of your leadership? Such clarity can help focus your efforts enormously and attract others to the effort.

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