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Why We Become Leaders

Courage—from the Latin *cor*, meaning *heart*—is herculean in the face of fear. The news that my dad was leaving us was heartbreaking for me. I wouldn't let anyone see or know that though. Not my mother. Not Kevin. Certainly not my dad; he was my advocate. I had already been people-pleasing for years up to this point, but now I was in a desperate position. Sure, I could have voiced how I felt to my father, but I sensed the gravity of the situation, and my survival strategy was to limit any risk in burdening or displeasing him. My future leadership tendency toward pleasing started right here, with this very experience. In my nine-year-old subconscious mind, I couldn't risk losing his love or protection because then I would be alone, with her, and in real danger.

In my heart though, I was disappointed and scared. I was angry at him, too, but I never let myself feel those emotions at the time. They didn't feel like safe emotions to have, so I stuffed them down like I had been doing with my mother all along. They piled up and calcified in my gut, but I pretended everything was fine between him and me. In fact, I put my father on a pedestal because any other subconscious strategy would have meant that both of my caregivers—the totality of my environment—were flawed and therefore unsafe.

More than 30 years later, I have come to realize that he knew my mother better than anyone. He knew what she was capable of, and he knew what was happening in our home. Maybe he was in some amount of denial and emotional repression due to his own experience with childhood physical abuse at the hands of his stepfather. To rescue me from our home would have forced him to engage with his own experience of abuse, and he was unable or unwilling. Relatedly, maybe his own gender-bias—that only men can exhibit violence and aggression to that extent—caused a blind spot for him. And whether either of these is true, I have come to trust that my feelings at nine were entirely valid. I love my dad, and he is fallible just like every one of us.

It wasn't until recently that two epiphanies emerged. First, I want a closer, more connected relationship with my father, but his capacity to engage with his own emotions keeps us in a relational dance that is loving and mostly utilitarian. We banter when we debate a topic, but his nature is reactionary and his default is to sarcasm. More often than not, he's listening to reply—not listening to understand. His wounds don't allow him the space to see what's important to me in a conversation, why I might place such value on the ideals I hold, or what emotion might be underneath what I'm saying. Though he has been the leader of our family, I had never viewed my father through the lens of his own trauma—until now. The depth of his heart is easy to observe, as is his unending generosity; I wonder if watching him is where I first learned that caring for others and being generous with time or resources are a subconscious, strategic duo that also help one gain love and belonging. Like any little boy, he just wanted to feel safe, loved, and appreciated within his family dynamic. I see that play out between us now that I'm in my 40s. And though I can get frustrated by our opposing communication styles, I remind myself of the root of his reactions. Few things would bring me greater joy than for my dad to integrate the traumatic experiences he has endured, but his choices are not my responsibility. I have realized that my nine-year-old self clung anxiously to the relationship because my life literally depended on it, and I've done a lot of work to unravel my insecure attachment style over the last three decades.

Secondly, all that said, I just might be more grateful for him today than ever before. He chose to break the patriarchal cycle of physical abuse within his own family and lineage, and he validated my experiences, no matter how difficult it might have been for him to recall being in my shoes.

One spring morning in 2021, I came across a podcast episode of Tom Bilyue's *Impact Theory* entitled, "Dr. Gabor Maté on How We Become Who We Are."[1] Dr. Maté is a Hungarian Canadian physician, best-selling author, and world-renowned expert on childhood development and trauma. Less than 15 minutes into the conversation, I realized why my father played such a large role in saving my life as a kid. He showed me kindness, was empathetic, and validated some of my most violent experiences with my mother. During the episode, Dr. Maté explained that many factors help determine resilience—and the greatest one of all is having just one person in your life who provides even a modicum of validation during childhood. I had two: my father and his mother, Ann.

Back then, my father's way of being unconsciously signaled to me that I might be loveable. *Maybe I'm not worthless. Maybe I do matter.* As a kid, all I needed was a miniscule hole to be poked in the story that I was broken and irreparably damaged. Physical abuse has a way of destroying the magic we come into this world with. I longed for something to counter what was being messaged to me daily by my mother, and my dad's validating words and actions created the possibility for me to become a healthy human. He is one reason why I did the work to remember who I am.

Dr. Maté went on to explain that there are two views each of us can choose from during our traumatic, formative years. We can either believe that there is something foundationally wrong with the world and our caretakers within it, or we can surmise that we must be the broken thing. The former view is much scarier, he says—because *if the environment is flawed, how can we ever feel safe in it?*

Being Needed Versus Being Wanted

In the documentary *The Wisdom of Trauma*, Dr. Maté tells a personal and vulnerable story about not feeling wanted as a child. In feeling

unwanted, he chose to become a medical doctor so that he would feel *needed* by his patients. His work in uncovering his own trauma led him to realize how much it plays a role in the positions we gravitate toward as adults.[2]

Many of us become leaders for one of three subconscious reasons:

1. We need to feel valued or prove ourselves worthy.
2. We need to dissociate from feelings of deep shame and powerlessness.
3. We feel a profound sense of responsibility for others.

When I put my arm around my brother the night my mother told us that my dad was leaving, I was making myself needed as much as I felt responsible to support him. As trauma survivors, we "value being needed because [we] can't imagine being wanted."[3] Many of us become leaders because we believe that if we can succeed, we'll prove to ourselves and everyone else that we have inherent worth.

Shadow Leadership Styles

Trauma can both encourage us to be our best and, at the same time, hold us back from living and leading with higher consciousness. Some people fight their way to the top because their ego needs to protect itself by dominating others. Others cater to the whims of those under them out of fear of abandonment or rejection. We constantly play out our responses to early unmet needs. In other words, many of us who find ourselves in leadership positions are actually attempting to combat or distract ourselves from unresolved trauma.

Let's talk about what kind of leader you've become. To keep things simple, I've broken this down into just two trauma-based styles: *People Controllers* and *People Pleasers.* Across these two categories, the need to feel valued and worthy is foundational because it is a basic psychological need of all humans, regardless of the specific type or longevity of trauma. Some of my work is influenced by *Positive Intelligence*—the work of Shirzad Charmine, a Stanford lecturer leading research on the saboteurs we encounter within ourselves and how they can undermine our leadership efficacy.

People Controllers

When perfectionism is taken to the extreme, it serves as temporary relief for People Controllers. The combination of self-doubt and fear of being judged by others is somehow quelled by doing things the right way, on time, without a single mistake or misstep. This sets up People Controllers for failure because perfection is an impossibility for themselves and for others.

Most controlling leaders don't understand that leadership is about influence more than anything else. The control mechanisms used are an attempt to avoid the deep shame and powerlessness they experienced in childhood. According to Shirzad Chamine, they "might have generated a sense of order in the middle of a chaotic family dynamic, or earned acceptance and attention from emotionally distant or demanding parents by standing out as the irreproachable, perfect kid."[4]

People-controlling leaders tend to micromanage, which erodes the empowerment of others. They assume they are always right, and that those within their organization approve of how they lead. They must have the final word in every decision and are deeply uncomfortable with any perceived threat to their authority. This is also referred to as *autocratic leadership*.

Archetypes include the Patriarch, the Hero, and the Dictator. Anyone who views themselves as a protector, breadwinner, authoritarian, or disciplinarian would likely fall into this category. If they had integrated their past trauma, they would recognize that they can only control their own reactions, attitudes, and biases—never people or other external forces.

> *"To empower people means learning how to lead people without controlling them."*[5]
>
> **—Dave Kraft**
> *MISTAKES LEADERS MAKE*

People Pleasers

According to Beatrice Chestnut, people-pleasing leaders unconsciously strive to be liked by as many people as possible. They attempt to earn

attention and acceptance through helping, rescuing, or flattering others. An underlying fear of rejection stems from childhood trauma and shows up as conflict avoidance, burnout due to inability to delegate, selflessness, poor boundaries, dependence, and even manipulation.[6]

People-pleasers are naturally empathetic, supportive, positive, and thrive in connection and meaningful relationships. However, the shadow traits here are actually self-serving, in that their ability to read and interpret the facial expressions, body language, and tonality of others provides all the information they need to position themselves well for being seen as genuine and caring. This can stray strongly off course when others don't notice or seem to care what their people-pleasing leader has done for them. They might become resentful, believing others are selfish and unappreciative—although they would never express those sentiments for fear of rejection or loss of relationship. They struggle to give and receive feedback, and they have difficulty holding others accountable.

Archetypes include the Matriarch, the Martyr, and the Peacemaker. Anyone who views themselves as a caretaker, rescuer, or cheerleader likely falls into this category. Ultimately, People Pleasers are no more effective at leadership than People Controllers. If they had integrated their childhood wounds, they would lead with compassionate empathy and healthy boundaries, address challenges using conscious communication, and prioritize their well-being by trusting others with delegated responsibilities.

When I look at my own upbringing and traumatic relationship with my mother, I see why I chose to make the courageous leap into starting a business at such a young age. I didn't feel worthy or loved by her, so I created a reality in which I would be needed by my employees and clients. It was just as important to prove to the world that I was valuable as it was to prove that to her and to myself.

To use Chamine's explanation about the *original survival function* of pleasers like me: two assumptions absorbed during childhood feed their worldview:

1. I must put others' needs ahead of my own.
2. I must give love and affection in order to get any back. I must earn [love because I am] not simply worthy of it.[7]

Taking that a step further, I wanted to be the kind of matriarch who showed up as the antithesis of my mother; I cared deeply about my team and our roster of clients. I know I allowed some to take advantage of my people-pleasing tendencies, and I avoided letting a few employees go for longer than I should have. My leadership evolution aligned with my personal values, but I was also proving to myself that I was nothing like my mother. That I was kind and good and caring. Beneficial and likable in the world.

Clearly, I tended toward people pleasing, but there are aspects of each shadow leadership style with which I identify. In fact, as the young owner of a cause marketing agency, I'm sure I shifted from one to the other of these categories, depending on what I had to manage on any given day. And while I repeated a behavioral pattern to ensure my unmet psychological needs were fulfilled, I do know that I did the best I could with the tools I had at the time.

Sorting for Sanity

My mother displayed characteristics of both Narcissistic and Borderline Personality Disorders (NPD and BPD), and the brand of love she was able to give didn't feel like love at all. I did not understand this at the time, but my mother saw me as the small version of herself, whom she loathed. She viewed me as competition for my father's attention and affection, as if there was a finite amount to go around. She took every opportunity to hurt me and keep me small. Nothing I did could ever be enough for her to love me the way most mothers love their children. The physical abuse I endured, in many ways, was easier to heal from than its verbal and emotional counterparts.

To survive within that environment, I relied on a subconscious categorization system to decipher her actions and words. I developed strategies and methods to organize, in my mind, the complex information I was continuously gathering. Understanding patterns or cues made me feel like I could better predict shifts in her moods to keep myself safe. Of course, I didn't know I was doing this at the time, but it became clear as I was writing this book that I was employing a brilliant

filtration method as a kid, placing my experiences in four mental receptacles:

1. **I trust myself:** *"That's not right. Something is definitely off about her."*
2. **I can't be sure what's true:** *"Did that really happen? Is that believable?"*
3. **I have to work harder:** *"I'll get it perfect next time; maybe then she'll love me."*
4. **I am unlovable:** *"She's right; I must be bad, damaged, or irreparably broken."*

These receptacles were like bins for garbage, compost, and recycling paper and plastic. In considering each behavior or hurtful phrase, I was scrutinizing its validity. *How do I digest this? Do I agree to receive this, and if so, how? Where does this live, based on how true it is?* Being on the receiving end of someone with BPD and NPD can make you feel unstable, and I believe this intuitively invented system was another piece of what saved my life. This was less about developing self-awareness early on; rather, it was a vital way to sort for my own sanity.

Luckily, for some reason, most of the inputs fell into the first receptacle and the rest were split among the latter three. What fell into the last two, though, embedded themselves deeply into adulthood, impacting nearly every relationship in my life. My need to earn love, protect myself from rejection, and validate my sense of self built the wobbly foundation of my leadership story. I invite you to pause here and consider any of your own experiences from childhood that might be similar, where your primary caregivers or other adults in your life said things or behaved in ways that hurt you—and forced you to consider whether they were actually true.

What frameworks, systems, or methods might you have invented during childhood?

Do you think they might still be influencing your thought processes today, as an adult?

Survival Superpowers

It makes sense that I became a keen witness. Through the power of observation, I noticed everything that was said and went unsaid in our home, from facial expressions and body language to energetic shifts in the room. Skills like these help us survive our younger years. They protect our developing ego. They help us learn how to resource when lack creates friction in unmet needs. We create frameworks for the things that we might come to realize later in life were a goddamn gift.

Until one day, they're not. One day, you understand that there are mechanisms that no longer serve you, personally and professionally. They might actually be the very things that hold you back from becoming who you are meant to be—before someone told you who you were. Before someone forced you to shrink into a smaller version of yourself.

These frameworks are life-saving, even life-giving, so the idea that you would purposefully destroy them seems unwise. But the reality is that there's a whole world of emotional regulation, effective communication, radical self-love, and joy available to you if you can take the courageous step to tear it all down. This level of realization and self-awareness comes at an emotional cost, but that cost is also a necessary release. Up to this point, you might have been repressing so much emotion that it's difficult for you to decipher how your way of being is no longer serving you. If you listen to the voice within and pay attention to the sensation in your body, you know there's a different way. You can feel that something better is waiting on the other side of something. I understand how it can all feel so uncertain, so vague. You have no idea what that something is or how long it might take to arrive.

What I can share is that I was so used to feeling victimized that I discounted the notion that I could choose a different path. I was so used to talking about what my mother had done to me that I forgot I could start focusing on the future instead of living in the past. I had a choice in the matter of who I could become—as a person, a partner, and a leader.

Though I want to say that I became a leader accidentally, nothing about my journey thus far has been coincidental. The truth is that I

became a leader because it was necessary for me to rewrite my personal narrative. I needed to experience the trials and tribulations of business ownership, employee attrition, over-servicing clients, finding my voice, enacting healthy boundaries, losing relationships, and creating a generative path forward for myself.

Why do you think you became a leader?