
Your Life Story *Is* Your Leadership Story

“Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult.”

—**Warren Bennis**, American leadership scholar

The first thing Neil MacKenna asked me to do was to write down my life story and share it with him. I found it strange at the time. Sharing personal details about my life did not come naturally. And it’s not a commonplace exercise. But maybe it should be, as similar tactics are used by some of the smartest people in the business world. Let me tell you about Jim.

Jim Mead is one of the most skilled headhunters ever to recruit talent. You’ve probably never heard of him. That’s partially because he’s been retired for several years now. But it’s more likely due to the fact that he’s a humble, self-effacing guy. He doesn’t chase the spotlight. Quietly, behind the scenes, he’s been responsible for identifying and recruiting some of the most successful giants of the corporate world over the last 40 years, not to mention large swaths of the leadership teams I assembled at Nabisco and Campbell Soup Company, 39 of whom have since gone on to become CEOs of prestigious organizations in their own right. Over the years, I’ve relied on Jim a lot. There was a time when I spoke with him almost every day. And you know what? For the most part, every person we recruited together turned out to be a winner. He’s got the magic touch.

So, how does he do it? It would be natural to assume that Jim asks lots of technical questions, gets into the weeds on job function, and presses recruits on their work experience. And, yes, he gets to that. But that’s not where he begins. **He starts with a person’s life story.** Not their work history, but their entire personal history. He asks prospective executives to tell him their life story from the very beginning.

As a result of this approach, the executive profiles he prepares for clients (he estimates he's written about 10,000 over the course of his career) are comprehensive and detail-rich, chock full of anecdotes about their upbringing, their time in middle and high school, their hobbies, their relationships, their interests. If they played flute in band, that's in there. If they had a childhood job at a grocery store, that's in there too. If they were particularly close with a grandparent or childhood pet? You bet that's included. He doesn't prepare a snapshot of an "executive"; he prepares a snapshot of a full human life in all its complexity and glory.

You might be curious why he includes all this seemingly superfluous stuff. What does their affection for a childhood pet have to do with their ability to lead global sales or a division of a Fortune 500 company? The answer is: everything.

There Is Only One You

Many of the problems that leaders face today are the result of their belief that their work life and their "real" life are two different things. When leaders feel stuck in their career, they often struggle because they have a siloed view of themselves. They have their "work" identity and their "personal" identity. And they're at odds. There is no cohesion. (And sure, *some* compartmentalization is good. For example, you don't always want to be bringing your work stresses home to the dinner table or vice versa.) But what Jim understands, and what I've come to know, is that the key to unlocking better leadership is found through a clear-eyed exploration of *you* – the real, full you. Not just the you that has, say, sales expertise or a strong marketing CV, but also the you that babysat for your siblings, makes a mean BBQ sauce, or is a die-hard college football fan.

If you want to reach your full potential, you can't turn one part of you off, or keep one part of you hidden. You might have heard a coach, parent, or boss tell you that you can't do something "half-assed" and get the results you want. The same goes with bringing only half of your full self to your leadership. It just won't work. Just as Neil helped me realize that I was struggling to reach my career goals because I was hiding who I was – you can't realize the full expression of your leadership if you're only bringing part of yourself to it.

The best leaders have figured this out; they bring their whole selves to their work. They are fully anchored in who they are and that informs how they behave in each moment, in and out of work.

Although Jim Mead will tell you he "goes with his gut" and doesn't much cotton to six-step processes like our Blueprint, he understands innately that a person's life story and their leadership story are one and the same. He knows that who you are in life is who you are at work, and his understanding of this fact is what made him the best at his job. Whenever, in the midst of one of the exercises in the six steps in *The Blueprint*, you find yourself wondering, "Why am I reflecting back on my life in this degree of detail?" remember this lesson.

Connect with What Matters Most

After Neil MacKenna asked me to write my life story, he helped me focus on what mattered most through an exercise he called "integrity-laden role-playing." In the exercise, we playacted a job interview. But we reversed the roles. He played the role of me, Doug, and I played the role of the hiring manager. Putting myself in the shoes of a person tasked with getting to know me,

my goals, and my strengths, I realized how difficult it would be to draw details out of me in an interview.

I'm a self-proclaimed introvert. External measures back up my own assessment. I've been evaluated as an introvert five times by the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator test. For the first half of my life I was reserved. Talking candidly about myself did not feel comfortable. The integrity-laden role-playing exercise made that abundantly clear. Neil played his part so realistically, like a true actor; he was cagey and hesitant, just like me. It was maddening; I couldn't get anything out of him! Putting myself on the other side of that exchange, as the interviewer, I began to realize how frustrating that must have been for a boss or hiring manager interacting with me.

Neil helped me realize that part of the problem was, yes, that I was shy. But, more importantly, I couldn't articulate what I wanted from my career or life because I hadn't ever taken the time to figure it out. "Doug," he said, "you can't answer some of these questions about what you're looking for because you don't know the answer. You've got some work to do to get to the bottom of it." He was absolutely right. I'd never given any careful thought about what my boldest dream of leadership success might look like, about what mattered most to me. I knew I wanted to advance in my career and provide for my family. But I didn't have a clear intention or purpose; I didn't have anything unifying and inspiring, something to give my efforts meaning.

Over the next few months with Neil, and then over the next several years on my own journey, I was determined to figure it out. I did a lot of work and searching and found some groundbreaking insights. Armed with new clarity about my character and competence, I was positioned – for the first

time in my life – to begin to understand what I wanted out of life and leadership. All these years I had thought I knew what I wanted, but I had never been able to crystallize what mattered to me into a succinct *intention*, like the desire to lead a large organization or to help build high-performance teams that defy the critics. That is, until Neil set me on the path to self-discovery. That path led me to study with Stephen Covey, and many others, who further activated my ability to articulate what mattered most to me. Finally, with their help, I was able to develop a clear vision of what mattered most and how I wanted to contribute.

In the next few chapters, I’m going to help you do the same thing. Using some of my own exercises and time-tested prompts, you will **Envision** an anchoring intention for your leadership.

To lay the groundwork, first you’re going to complete a condensed version of the exercise I did with Neil. Writing your *entire* life story isn’t necessary. But it’s helpful to extract some “life story” highlights before you embark on your Blueprint journey.

Highlights of Your Leadership Story

In this exercise, you’ll begin to gain a better understanding of what makes you, you. Then you will use that information to **Envision** a fulfilling path for your life and leadership.

Complete this exercise in whatever way feels right (pen, paper, laptop, or e-workbook) and keep your Post-it® Notes handy. You should always complete the exercises herein in the way that works best with your preferences.

Highlights of Your Leadership Story

Getting Started

Think about the most important aspects of your life and leadership story thus far. Since there is a rich tapestry of experiences and influences that have brought you to this point in your life and career, consider this exercise as a reflection on your personal “highlight reel.” Have fun with it, be open-minded, and try not to get hung up on judgmental thoughts about what you “should” include. There aren’t any right or wrong answers. Anything goes.

KEY QUESTIONS

If you close your eyes and let your mind go for a minute or two, what stands out most vividly to you in your life thus far?

Imagine your mind is a fly buzzing around in the air but constantly finding new surfaces to land on. What memories does your mind “land” on over and over again?

These might be momentous occasions, like having to change schools as a kid, going to college, winning an award, getting married, changing careers, or witnessing the birth of your children.

Or your mind might land on other highlights entirely: the first time you spoke in public, an epiphany about your work or life, a treasured conversation with a friend, or a fun-filled trip. Try to brainstorm at least ten **highlights** that stand out to you.

Now, think specifically about this for a few minutes:

What were some of the defining moments, conversations, challenges, expectations, disappointments, or big wins that left an indelible imprint on you?

Examples might include winning (or losing) an important competition in high school or college, getting positive or negative feedback from a coach or mentor, getting fired or promoted, or even falling in love or breaking up with someone for the first time.

To explore this fully, try to identify at least five **defining moments**. Aim for more specificity than in the first ten highlights you wrote down. Maybe you can even remember specific dialogue here.

(continued)

Highlights of Your Leadership Story (*cont'd*)

Next, bring your attention to this:

What were some of your biggest goals – those already achieved or surpassed, or those that still loom large in your mind, just out of reach?

Maybe you want to run a marathon (or maybe you already have). Maybe you've wanted to serve on a board, run for office, go back to school, or teach a class.

Here, try to identify five of your biggest **goals** – either those already achieved or those that lie on the horizon.

Goal 1: _____

Goal 2: _____

Goal 3: _____

Goal 4: _____

Goal 5: _____

Now focus on this:

How did changes or events in your personal life affect your leadership journey and vice versa? Did you ever have to make a big move to a new place? Did you ever have to make a sacrifice for a family member?

Did a crisis or life-altering event ever knock you down at some point only for you to come back from it with more resilience?

Write down your recollection of three big **changes** that have affected your life. It's fine if there is some overlap with things you have already written down.

Change 1: _____

Change 2: _____

Change 3: _____

So far:

Which parts of your story have felt most fulfilling, or yielded unexpected revelations about your character or belief systems? Did you ever surprise yourself by doing something selfless or courageous?

Conversely, can you think of a time when you wish you had acted with more bravery but didn't? What did these experiences show you about who you are and what you believe?

Write down everything that comes to mind.

If this exercise begins to feel self-indulgent or uncomfortable, good. Lean in. Remember, your story is special and unique. It's what makes you, you. The story that has shaped you is always with you and will have a profound impact on how you live and lead in the real world.

Now, in an effort to synthesize some key takeaways from all of this thinking, try to think of the top 5 to 7 things you would feel moved to share as defining parts of your leadership story to someone who has never met you before and is completely unfamiliar with your life.

(continued)

Highlights of Your Leadership Story (*cont'd*)

Use the numbered spaces to share each “highlight” in a sentence or two.

Highlight 1: _____

Highlight 2: _____

Highlight 3: _____

Highlight 4: _____

Highlight 5: _____

Highlight 6: _____

Highlight 7: _____

Wrapping Up the Exercise

Nice job. You’ve completed your first exercise in *The Blueprint*. This was a preview of the types of exercises you will do in the six steps.

Doing this kind of ruminative work is not always easy. It can feel ambiguous and doesn’t appear to yield anything tangible at first. And that can seem strange. Most of us are used to performing an action and getting something specific in return. If we do a job, we receive money. If we write an email, we expect a response back. So this kind of exercise might feel

like uncharted territory, because the output from your input is not concrete. Although you may not have any meaty chunks of insight yet, that's okay – and expected.

You're in exactly the right place; this is how processes work. You're not solving a math problem with a clearly defined solution. You're wrestling with a much greater problem of how to lead with increasing effectiveness and authenticity in a tough world. There is no precise "answer" (and even if there were, it would probably change). What you are working toward is a path forward, for guidance, a roadmap that leads to a life you envision. My path began with writing my story for Neil. And now you've begun to chart your path too – a path that will likely be full of twists and turns.

Now that you've taken an important first step and laid the groundwork to start your Blueprint journey, the next chapter will help you envision the life you wish to create. You will reflect on your values, answer the first three questions of leadership, and write a first working draft of your purpose.