



LEADERSHIP IS AN INSIDE JOB

Quint Studer

One of my favorite songs is “Changes” by David Bowie.

In the old days (before social media, texting, email, and being able to hear songs on demand), I called a radio station to request that it be played. Being in my twenties at the time, I was in complete denial that what I needed was not just to like the song “Changes” but to start changing me. This realization came a few years later.

Today, I’m 68 years old and am blessed to say that in the last 37 years, I’ve experienced things beyond my wildest imagination. But the accomplishments I so desperately wanted couldn’t have happened until I fixed my insides. Looking back, I see my life as two very different chapters. Let’s start with the last 37 years, then we’ll cover the first 31.

I want to tell my story because it illustrates what I believe: Leadership is an inside job. In my latest book, *The Busy Leader’s Handbook*, Chapter 1 is on being self-aware and coachable. That’s because holding up the mirror and having the humility to embrace learning are keys to getting the insides right. We’ll talk more about this truth later, but, first, the rest of the story. I suggest you relate, not compare. In my work, I find relating leads to action, and comparing leads to rationalization.

Over the last 37 years, I’ve written 10 books, including some bestsellers. I’ve been part of award-winning organizations. I’ve started a company that received the Malcolm Baldrige Award for Quality, and sold it after a great run. My wife, Rishy, and I have donated to many great causes, including building a new children’s hospital. I’ve spoken

to thousands of groups and owned a Double-A professional baseball team. I have started a nonprofit that focuses on early brain growth, civic engagement, and skill building for leaders in business and community.

I'm grateful to say I've played a role in revitalizing Pensacola, Florida. Just this year we were named "World's Strongest Town" by nonprofit organization Strong Towns. We were number 15 on *U.S. News & World Report's* "Most Desirable Places to Live in the U.S." list. We were 17 on Go.Verizon.com's "Best Small Cities to Start a Small Business" list. And back in 2013, the American Planning Association named Palafox Street one of the "Ten Great Streets in America."

I was able to be at the bedsides of my only sibling and my father when they passed away. I've been put in Lyons Township High School's Hall of Fame (La Grange, Illinois). The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater named me a distinguished alumnus, and the University of West Florida endowed me with an honorary doctorate. Most of all, I hope I have helped people along the way.

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Having read this far, you may feel I should receive a Top Narcissist Award. I hope not! I truly feel that ego deflation is a key part of leadership. My experience is that when you do not deflate your own ego and keep it deflated, it gets deflated for you. The former is much less painful!

Now, why do I say leadership starts on the inside? Anyone who has flown has heard the instruction to put on your own oxygen mask before helping someone else do so. Taking care of yourself first may appear selfish, but it isn't. Until one gets oneself in order, it is very hard to be of service to anyone. (That is why I write books. It is certainly not a big money maker, but it is a way to be useful to others.)

When I look back at my first 31 years, it's clear I needed to get myself in order. One time when I was 28, I was in a bar and very attracted to a certain lady. Unfortunately, so was my friend Bill. I knew Bill had already been married twice. His first wife had died, and his second marriage had ended in divorce. I moved quickly to start a conversation with the lady, and when she and Bill made eye contact, I shared that he had already been married twice. I was hoping this would put him in a bad light. I left out that I was a two-time divorcé!

My point is, I was much better at taking others' inventory than taking my own. It was easier to put someone else down than to bring myself up.

A quick capsule of where I was in December of 1982: I was twice divorced, heavily in debt, and avoiding my parents so they wouldn't ask questions I didn't want to answer. I was a poor father to my two children from my first marriage. A poor performer in the workplace. Envious of others. I was always thinking if only. If only I had gone to another college, had not gotten married at 18, had picked another profession, worked for better people, and

on and on. If you had asked me how things were during this time, you would have heard either “Great!” or a long list of why nothing was my fault. I was a victim of circumstances.

Then it happened: I had what is often called a moment of clarity. Suddenly, I saw myself as I was, not as I thought I was or wanted to be. It was a wake-up call, and I listened. I began seeking out people who would provide unfiltered feedback and a course of action. In essence, I embraced a new design for living.

Remember the subject of Chapter 1 in *The Busy Leader’s Handbook*? I had become self-aware and was trying my best to be coachable. In this chapter, I discuss how a venture capitalist (Harry Gruner of JMI) shared the two things he first looks for in deciding whether to invest in a company: the self-awareness and coachability of the founder.

To get the insides right, I’ve found the first step is to make sure non-biased feedback is sought, listened to, and acted on. A CEO may like to say, “We have created a great place to work.” Yet if employee turnover is high, the data suggests otherwise.

Holding up the mirror and having the humility to embrace learning are keys to getting the insides right.

When I was in the process of selling Studer Group, I had an interesting conversation with a prospective buyer. He asked how the industry felt about Studer Group. I said, "You just spent \$350,000 on market research on us. What did you find out?" He replied that the feedback was excellent. I then asked, "What does the market think of you?" The answer was, "We feel good, for when we are competing for a contract we usually get it." I then asked, "What about companies that never ask you for work?"

My conclusion was that they actually did a better job taking inventory of others than themselves. I can relate. (Remember my friend Bill?) I am an expert on taking others' inventory and not so good at taking my own—but I am working on it.

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IF YOU ARE A LEADER, WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET THE INSIDES RIGHT? HERE ARE SOME OF MY LEARNINGS:

1 | Don't assume you know. Consistently take inventory. Waffle House does a time and motion study twice every 90 days. We can all take inventory. There are plenty of tools out there, from SurveyMonkey to more sophisticated measurements. Use them.

2 | Check for barriers that block self-awareness. First, denial. It's not a river in Africa. It is the first block to learning what we're good at and where we need improvement.

Second, rationalization. This is so subconscious that we are often unaware of it—for what we are rationalizing makes sense. For example, *My customer service is worse because people with high expectations come here. Or, Only unhappy people fill out the survey. Or, They have more staff than we do. Or, I was passed over due to favoritism.* Usually it takes metrics or someone else holding up a mirror to help us get a grip on rationalization.

Blame is another barrier: "It is not our fault." When I was in healthcare, a good source of blame was the government: *They are not paying us enough in Medicare payments.* When I was in education, it was, *Their parents (or that last teacher) did not get them ready.* When I was an hourly employee, it was the boss. When I became a boss, it was the employees. As someone shared with me, when a person is finger-pointing, three fingers are pointing back at them.

Still another barrier is lack of necessary skill. In an ever-changing environment, we must actively work to get better, because when we stay the same, we actually get worse. Today we can use many new ways to hire talent, yet often companies hire like they have been for years.

Finally, we can lack the needed will. We must ask ourselves, Do I have the willingness to do what it takes to achieve the desired outcomes? If so, we need to get busy. If not, we need to move on.

3 | Talk it out with trusted mentors. Bert Thornton, retired president of Waffle House, wrote a book called *Find an Old Gorilla*. Old or young, find someone you can share your insides with. Many times the clarity and answers come just from the sharing. I recently met with someone who was struggling with a list of things that were bothering him. He shared eight of these items with me. It turned out seven of those were ones he had no control over. When I pointed this out, it was as if a rock had been lifted from him.

4 | Know that your obstacles may also be your opportunities or strengths. The key is in how we handle them. Years ago, I taught high school. Back then the word hyperactive came into vogue. It was used to describe a student who was usually not doing well in school. These students were usually very energetic. What I noticed was that many of the so-called “star students” had the same characteristics as the ones labeled hyperactive. The difference is how the characteristic is aligned.

Most people find predictive indexes very helpful. At the Studer Family of Companies, all staff complete the MBS Survey. The letters stand for Management by Strengths. This assessment shows a person’s predominant work style: either outcomes-oriented, people-oriented, process-oriented, or structure-oriented. The idea is to help people and teams see how to maximize each person’s strength.

I am hearing impaired. While this causes challenges, it also has helped me to be a good listener. Why? Because I must focus when in a conversation or a presentation. I also have

a speech impediment. I went through intense speech therapy. This helped me acquire resilience and also handle failure.

Finally, when I was 31, I crashed. I surrendered to the fact that I am an alcoholic. I thought that was the worst thing that could happen: No more fun for me! Yet being in recovery is what provided me a better way of living that created these past 37 years. Yes, doors close, and it is painful, but I like the saying that when one door closes another one will open. I also like the saying, "It can be hell in the hallways." My recovery has helped me deal with those hallways.

5 | Be grateful. A full heart of gratitude leaves little room for anything else. Yes, at times life is hard. However, those people who make a gratitude list on a regular basis seem to handle life's ups and downs better than those who do not.

6 | Separate acceptance from liking. Thirteen years ago, there was a situation with one of my children that was very painful. I kept trying to handle it perfectly, to be a combination of Gandhi and Mother Teresa. Yet I was still in pain. One day as I was describing what was taking place to a group of people, someone I did not know overheard me. He came up to me and said, "Accepting does not mean liking."

This changed me profoundly. We can be discouraged about where we are at work or in life. However, until we accept the situation as it is, we will not be able to take the right steps forward. I spent many years in healthcare and regularly heard people share their concerns and frustration over many things. Yet in most instances, there are actions to take. I always left them with a saying that is many years old: *Change the things you can, accept the things you can't, and have the wisdom to know the difference.*

In summary, if I can do it, so can you. Most likely you can do it with a less painful journey than I have taken.

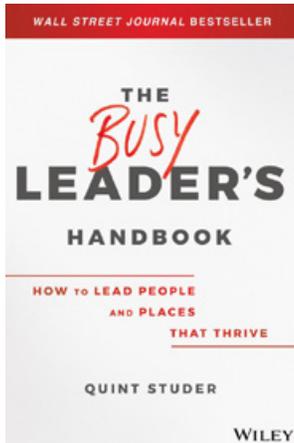
Years ago, I was speaking to a large group about my progress over the past decade. Previously, I had attended this group many times, though not as a speaker. I had noticed that at the end of the event, many people would line up to thank the speaker. When I completed my talk and the event ended, I waited for the people to line up. No one was rushing to the podium. Finally, one person came toward me. *Ah, here it comes, I thought, that compliment I am fishing for.*

The person told me how much he enjoyed the talk and how it helped him. He said he had been on the journey for four years and was discouraged by what he felt was a lack of progress. However, after hearing where I was after 10 years, he felt better about where he was now. Clearly, he was not in awe of my progress. He then turned and walked away. That was the extent of my lineup.

As I left the room, I laughed. I was grateful for the ego deflation. We often get what we need—not what we want—and then we realize that is what we wanted all the time. 📖



Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Quint Studer is a lifelong businessman, entrepreneur, and student of leadership. He not only teaches it, he has done it. He has worked with individuals at all levels and across a variety of industries to help them become better leaders and create high-performing organizations. He seeks always to simplify high-impact leader behaviors and tactics for others. Quint has a great love for teaching his insights in books and has authored nine of them in addition to *The Busy Leader's Handbook*, which reached number five on the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller list. His book *Results That Last* reached number seven on the same list. He currently serves as the Entrepreneur-in-Residence at the University of West Florida.

To learn more please visit www.thebusyleadershandbook.com.



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