

FOREWORD BY DAVID GERGEN

BILL GEORGE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP*

**DISCOVER YOUR
TRUE
NORTH**

EXPANDED AND UPDATED EDITION

**BECOMING AN
AUTHENTIC
LEADER**



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Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value (2003)

True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership (2007)
(with Peter Sims)

Finding Your True North: A Personal Guide (2008) (with Nick Craig and Andrew McLean)

7 Lessons for Leading in Crisis (2009)

Discover Your True North

Expanded and Updated Edition

Bill George

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my family. First to my wife, Penny, whose love, passion for life, and counsel have enabled all the Georges to discover our True North. And to our sons, Jeff and Jon, and our daughters-in-law, Renee and Jeannette, who are making important contributions to the world as authentic leaders.

PREFACE

THE REMARKABLE LEGACY OF WARREN BENNIS

Warren Bennis was one of the great pioneers in the field of leadership. Small in physical stature, he was a giant in his intellect, his heart, and his spirit. Just as Peter Drucker was the father of management, Bennis was the father of leadership.

Bennis transformed our understanding of what it means to be a leader. He was the first scholar who said leadership is not a set of genetic characteristics, but the result of a lifelong process of self-discovery. Rejecting the notion that leaders are born with certain traits, he opened the door to the real source of leadership: *within you*. He wrote:

The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born—that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That's nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.

He showed how leaders develop through their life experiences, are shaped by their crucibles, and emerge ever stronger to take on responsibilities of leadership. He said unequivocally, “Leadership is character,” adding,

It is not just a superficial question of style, but has to do with who we are as human beings, and with the forces that have shaped us. The process of becoming a leader is much the same as the process of becoming an integrated human being.

Bennis's early life was deeply influenced by his association at Antioch College and later at the Massachusetts Institute

of Technology with Douglas McGregor, author of *The Human Side of Enterprise*. While in Cambridge, he connected with Abraham Maslow (creator of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), Peter Drucker, Paul Samuelson, and Erik Erikson, whose theories on the eight stages of human development influenced Bennis's own *generativity* in his later years. He went on to write 30 books. Many of today's influential leadership authors, such as Tom Peters, Nitin Nohria, David Gergen, Jim O'Toole, Bob Sutton, Jeff Sonnenfeld, and Doug Conant are indebted to Bennis for their ideas.

As president of the University of Cincinnati, he realized his personal truth, "I was never going to be able to be happy with *positional power*. What I really wanted was *personal power*: having influence based on my voice. My real gift is what I can do in the classroom and as a mentor." Following a heart attack in 1979, he found his home at the University of Southern California.

Bennis's influence on business leaders was widespread and profound. Thousands of leaders who never knew him were inspired by his writings and adopted his approach to leadership. Many chief executive officers (CEOs) have told me personally what a profound influence he had on their leadership.

I first encountered his writing in 1989 when I read *On Becoming a Leader*. It was a revelation: Finally, I had found a philosophy of leadership I could resonate with. Throughout my years at Medtronic and Harvard Business School (HBS), I have built on his philosophies in my work and teaching.

We first met at the World Economic Forum in the late 1990s. He suffered from heart problems, and had recently had a Medtronic defibrillator implanted. In December of 2000 I invited him as a guest patient to an annual Medtronic event, where he graciously thanked the employees who designed and manufactured his defibrillator in front of 10,000 people.

He was fond of saying he had Medtronic “in his heart” and then describing how his defibrillator saved his life half a dozen times. I once witnessed this in person in Cambridge. While he was speaking, his defibrillator went off, and he slumped to the ground, dropping his papers. Ever the gracious soul, he picked up his papers, apologized for the disruption, and continued his talk. When it went off a second time 10 minutes later, the Cambridge Fire Department escorted him to safety.

In 2002, my wife, Penny, and I attended a seminar Bennis and David Gergen led at the Aspen Institute. At the time I was eager to write a book on my experiences at Medtronic but was struggling to find a publisher. My intent was to offer practical approaches to leading and develop leaders that enabled people to be their authentic selves, rather than emulating others. With Bennis's encouragement, Jossey-Bass published *Authentic Leadership* as part of the Warren Bennis Signature Series. Bennis served as executive editor and wrote in the foreword, “Timeless leadership is always about character, and it is always about authenticity.”

He became my mentor, friend, and intellectual colleague, and gave me the courage to become a writer. As executive editor for my four books in the Warren Bennis Signature Series, he generously shared his time and his insights. In the midst of writing *True North*, Peter Sims and I spent five days with him going over the conceptual ideas and stories used in the book. Unlike many great scholars who protect their ideas, Bennis genuinely wanted me to expand on his and make them fully accessible to the new generation of leaders, which he later called “the crucible generation.” We shared a common aim to influence the next generation to lead with clear purpose to serve others and make the world a better place.

Two months before he died, Bennis asked my wife and me to discuss leadership in the next-to-last class he ever taught. Although Bennis was beset with bodily ills, his mind and humanity were as sharp as ever. What other professors have you known who were still teaching at age 89? Over dinner that evening Penny asked what he would like on his tombstone. He replied, "Generous Friend." A generous friend is just what Bennis was to thousands of friends, students, scholars, and mentees whom he influenced with kindness, buoyancy of spirit, and wisdom.

Bennis's last book, *Still Surprised*, has a photo of him walking barefoot on the beach with his pant legs rolled up, leaving behind large footprints in the sand. These footprints serve as a calling to incorporate his ideas in our leadership. Ultimately, this will become Bennis's greatest legacy. They bring to mind a stanza from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *A Psalm of Life*:

*Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.*

FOREWORD

When Peter Drucker was in his prime, CEOs often traveled across the country to California to seek his counsel on how to lead and manage their companies. He was an iconic figure in the business world, the father of management studies, whose 30 books were highly influential in shaping modern global companies. As I found in conversation late in his life, he had a wisdom about him that was spellbinding.

Upon his death 10 years ago, people naturally asked, “Who will carry on Peter's work?” Soon it became apparent that the most obvious candidate was Warren Bennis, and once again, CEOs made the trek to California to meet quietly with one of the sweetest, wisest men I have been blessed to know. Warren was the father of leadership studies in American universities, the man who gave them academic legitimacy through his two dozen books, and the best mentor and friend one could possibly have.

Upon his death a year ago, the question naturally arose again: “Well, who will now carry on Warren's work?” With the publication of his sixth and most important book, *Discover Your True North*, we may well have our candidate: Bill George. There are obvious differences: Bill himself would modestly point out that both Drucker and Bennis were lifelong scholars deeply schooled in theory; by contrast, Bill first made his mark as a highly successful CEO of a large company before becoming a major thought leader. Yet all three have been at the forefront in shaping leadership and management practices of successive generations.

By chance, Warren introduced me to Bill along with Dan Vasella of Novartis at a dinner in Davos, Switzerland, where we were all attending the World Economic Forum in 2001.

Bill was coming off his years as CEO of Medtronic and was beginning to pull together his thoughts and experiences about leadership so that he could share them with younger business leaders.

Soon Bill published his first book, essentially a memoir, titled *Authentic Leadership*, and it was quickly a best seller. Without realizing it, he had launched an entirely new career, one with even greater impact than his first. In reading *Discover Your True North*, you will find not only a distillation of his ideas about leadership but also revealing portraits of a galaxy of more diverse leaders and what they have learned on their own journeys toward a True North. This book bids to be a classic, standing alongside *The Effective Executive* by Peter Drucker and *On Becoming a Leader* by Warren Bennis. I am proud to call Bill a friend and trusted adviser—and to salute him on the completion of his best book.

Here's what is essential for a reader to understand: Experience shows that Bill's ideas not only work well in practice but *also* apply across the board, helping not only business leaders but those in the civic and public sectors as well. Most books that come from the academy are intended for a small audience of specialized scholars. That is the way advances in knowledge are often made. But non-scholars wonder how this progress applies to them.

Bill George's work—like Warren's and Peter's—intentionally crosses the bridge between the academy and practice. Through writing, teaching, and mentoring, he is helping leaders become better at leading themselves and, in turn, their organizations. At present more than two dozen CEOs of major global companies are calling on him regularly for counsel and advice.

The evidence shows that leaders from across the world are hungry to discover their True North and to make it their polar star. After initial teaching stints at the International

Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Europe and at Yale School of Management, Bill came to the Harvard Business School (HBS) as a professor of management. There in 2005, he introduced his course, Authentic Leadership Development, as a second-year elective. Students embraced it with growing enthusiasm, such that it has become one of the most popular courses at HBS and attracts a growing number in executive education.

Bill no longer teaches the master of business administration course but instead is focusing on executive education, where CEOs and senior executives focus on their leadership, including three courses each year for CEOs. Now there is a cadre of other faculty members who are devotees, led by Scott Snook (a retired army officer) and Tom DeLong and blessed by Dean Nitin Nohria.

Fortunately, Bill's course has migrated to the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS), where I am a professor of practice and codirector of our Center for Public Leadership. Dana Born, a retired air force general and the first woman in any military branch to gain flag rank while at a military academy, has just started teaching the course, and once again students are responding with gusto. Moreover, Bill has introduced True North to an annual training program at the HKS for Young Global Leaders chosen by the World Economic Forum. Attendees love what the program offers, especially the deep-dive, small-group conversations every morning over breakfast.

Altogether, some 6,000 men and women have now been trained at Harvard alone in Bill's ideas about authentic leadership. Longitudinal studies are not yet possible on how much he may have shaped lives and leadership, but anecdotal evidence points to encouraging results.

One group that has had lots of exposure to Bill and his work is students who have pursued joint degrees at HBS and HKS

and in their third year have received scholarships from Bill and Penny George. These George Fellows, typically in their late twenties, have a home at our Center for Public Leadership and meet frequently, often with Bill and Penny. Bill generously mentors a number of them and remains close long after they have graduated. Altogether, the George Fellowship now has 100 alumni.

To be sure, many had transformative experiences that strengthened their leadership before they became George Fellows. Even so, their recent achievements have been impressive. Here are a few whom Bill continues to mentor: Seth Moulton won an upset victory in his campaign for Congress and has attracted a national following. Maura Sullivan is now serving as an assistant secretary at the Department of Veterans Administration. Nate Fick is CEO of Endgame as well as former CEO of the Center for a New American Security and author of *One Bullet Away*. Brian Elliott founded Friendfactor, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) nonprofit for straight people that has been pivotal in winning battles for gay rights. Rye Barcott is running a venture fund for solar installations in North Carolina; was selected as a Young Global Leader at Davos; and is author of *It Happened on the Way to War*. John Coleman is a principal of Invesco in Atlanta and coauthored *How to Argue Like Jesus*. Stephen Chan is chief of staff for the Boston Foundation. Peter Brooks works for a water technology company and directs the Warrior-Scholar Project. Jonathan Kelly runs a private equity company based in Singapore. And Claude Burton is directing marketing for a rapidly growing information technology firm in Brazil. Can there be any doubt that the ideas here apply to emerging leaders from every sector of life and across national boundaries?

As this book is being published, the world is slipping ever more deeply into a leadership crisis. For people everywhere,

life is becoming ever more volatile and unpredictable. Instead of putting a firm hand on the wheel, many leaders seem unable to steer toward safe ports in the storm. A survey of global opinion the World Economic Forum published in 2015 found that 76 percent believe we have had a serious loss of leadership. Business leaders have recovered some of their ground lost since 2008–2009, but they rank only modestly above political leaders.

This book can perhaps help us find our way. If individual leaders can recognize when they have drifted away from True North and make successful course corrections, as Bill George argues, nations can as well. Surely, authentic leadership beats what we have now.

David Gergen

INTRODUCTION

Have you discovered *your* True North? Do you know what your life and your leadership are all about?

Leadership starts with being authentic, the genuine you. The purpose of *Discover Your True North* is to enable you to become the leader you want to be. In the process you will discover your True North—the internal compass that guides you successfully through life.

Your True North

True North is your orienting point—your fixed point in a spinning world—that helps you stay on track as a leader. It is derived from your most deeply held beliefs, your values, and the principles you lead by. It is your internal compass, unique to you, that represents who you are at your deepest level.

Just as a compass needle points toward a magnetic pole, your True North pulls you toward the purpose of your leadership. When you follow your internal compass, your leadership will be authentic, and people will naturally want to associate with you. Although others may guide or influence you, your truth is derived from your life story. As Warren Bennis said, “You are the author of your life.”

Discovering your True North takes a lifetime of commitment and learning. As you are tested in the world, you yearn to look at yourself in the mirror and respect the person you see and the life you are leading. Some days will be better than others, but as long as you are true to who you are, you can cope with the most difficult circumstances life presents.

The world may have very different expectations for you than you have for yourself. Whether you are leading a small team or at the top of an organization, you will be pressured by external forces to respond to their needs and seduced by rewards for fulfilling those needs. These pressures and seductions may cause you to detour from your True North. When you get too far off course, your internal compass tells you something is wrong and you need to reorient yourself. It requires courage and resolve to resist the constant pressures and expectations confronting you and to take corrective action when necessary.

As CEO of Sara Lee Brenda Barnes said, “The most important thing about leadership is your character and the values that guide your life.” She added:

If you are guided by an internal compass that represents your character and values, you're going to be fine. Let your values guide your actions and don't ever lose your internal compass. Everything isn't black or white. There are a lot of gray areas in business.

When you discover your True North, you find coherence between your life story and your leadership. A century ago psychologist William James wrote:

I have often thought that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which...he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: “This is the real me!”

Can you recall a time when you felt most intensely alive and could say with confidence, “*This is the real me*”? Professionally, I had that feeling from the first time I walked into Medtronic in 1989 and joined a group of talented people dedicated to the mission to “alleviate pain, restore health,

and extend life.” I felt I could be myself and be appreciated for who I was and what I could contribute. I sensed immediately that my values aligned with the organization's values.

The Rise of Authentic Leaders

When I wrote *Authentic Leadership* in 2003, the most common question I received was “What do you mean by *authenticity*?” To me, being authentic was the natural way of leading, but many people in that era of charismatic leaders considered leading authentically a new idea.

Today *authenticity is seen as the gold standard for leadership*. No longer is leadership about developing charisma, emulating other leaders, looking good externally, and acting in one's self-interest, as was so often the case in the late twentieth century. Nor should leadership be conflated with your leadership style, managerial skills, or competencies. These capabilities are very important, but they are the outward manifestation of who you are as a person. You cannot fake it to make it, because people sense intuitively whether you are genuine.

The hierarchical, directive leadership style so prevalent in the past century is fading fast in favor of today's collaborative leaders, who believe in distributed leadership at all levels. The old notion of leaders as the smartest guys in the room—as Enron CEO Jeff Skilling typified—has been replaced by leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence (EQ).

Because of this move toward greater authenticity, we are blessed with much higher caliber leaders today. In discovering their True North, they have committed to leading with purpose to make a difference in the world and leave behind lasting legacies. The quality of today's leaders

is reflected in the lasting results they are achieving within their organizations.

For this all-new edition, my colleague Zach Clayton and I interviewed and studied 47 authentic leaders that represent the diversity of the new generation of global leaders—among them, Unilever's Paul Polman, PepsiCo's Indra Nooyi, Alibaba's Jack Ma, the *Huffington Post*'s Arianna Huffington, Merck's Ken Frazier, and Sojourners' Jim Wallis.

Before writing *True North* in 2007, our research team of Peter Sims, Diana Mayer, Andrew McLean, and I set out to get definitive answers to the question of *how* to develop authentic leaders. We interviewed 125 authentic leaders to learn the secrets of their leadership. This research constitutes the largest in-depth study ever undertaken on how business leaders develop.

We circled back to most of the leaders interviewed for the first edition to get updated on their progress as leaders. Much to our pleasure, we found that the vast majority of them are doing exceptionally well. Some have moved to new positions, some have retired from their organizations and taken on new challenges, but almost all of them continue to make vital contributions to business and society. Only a handful have failed.

In *Discover Your True North*, we retain the structure of the first edition, but go much deeper into what we have learned about leadership in the past decade. It includes many insights that my Harvard Business School colleagues and I, as well as practitioners and scholars around the world, have learned about leaders: how they discovered their True North, developed as authentic leaders, became global leaders, and stayed on the course of their True North throughout their lifetimes.

Although the 47 new leaders included in *Discover Your True North* are more international and more diverse than the first group, their stories and beliefs about leadership showed a high level of congruence with the earlier interviewees. (The back of the book contains the list of interviewees for this updated edition.)

Rather than waiting to get to the top to become leaders, they looked for every opportunity to lead and to develop themselves. Every one of them faced trials, some of them severe. Many cited these experiences, along with the people who helped them develop, as primary reasons for their success. Without exception, these leaders believed being authentic made them more effective and successful.

As the result of our research into these leaders, we have a clearer understanding of what constitutes an effective and authentic leader. We know that each leader is unique, just as each human being is. The reality is that *no one can be authentic by trying to be like someone else*. You can learn from others' experiences, but you cannot be successful trying to be *like* them. People will only trust you when you are genuine and authentic.

If you create a false persona or wear a mask, people will quickly see through you. As Reatha Clark King, chair of the National Association of Corporate Directors, said:

If you're aiming to be like somebody else, you're being a copycat because you think that's what people want you to do. You'll never be a star with that kind of thinking. But you might be a star—unreplicable—by following your passion.

Amgen chairman and CEO Kevin Sharer, who gained priceless experience at the beginning of his career by working as Jack Welch's assistant, saw the downside of General Electric's cult of personality in those days.

“Everyone wanted to be like Jack,” he explained.
“Leadership has many voices. You need to be who you are, not try to emulate somebody else.”

The Leadership Transformation

What has caused this dramatic change in today's leaders?

As CEO of Medtronic in the 1990s, I witnessed firsthand many corporations choose the wrong people as CEO. Under pressure from Wall Street to maximize short-term earnings, boards of directors frequently selected leaders for their image, style, and charisma rather than their substance and character. Many of these leaders put their companies at risk by focusing on the trappings and spoils of leadership instead of building their organizations for the long term. When those who failed walked away with enormous financial settlements, confidence in business leaders further eroded.

These stock market pressures boomeranged in the fall of 2008 when many financial institutions became insolvent, forcing the U.S. government to intervene to save the economic system from complete collapse. In the deep recession that followed, millions of Americans depleted their savings and unemployment rose above 10 percent. The root cause of this crisis was not financial instruments, such as subprime mortgages, but *failed leaders*, just as it was in the early 2000s.

As a result, public trust in business leaders fell to its lowest level in 50 years. In business, trust is the coin of the realm. The success of any organization depends upon customers' trust in the products they buy, employees' trust in their leaders, investors' trust in those who steward their funds, and public trust in capitalism as a fair and equitable means of creating wealth for all. More than seven years after the

global financial crisis, the public still has low trust in business leaders.

The positive side of these crises is the high quality of leaders who have emerged in the new generation and how well they have learned the lessons of these debacles. These leaders lived through the corporate governance debacle of 2003, when Enron and WorldCom went bankrupt, and survived the global financial collapse of 2008.

From these negative experiences when many leaders went awry, today's leaders learned what *not* to do. They saw many of their predecessors get caught in the trap of chasing money, fame, and power, and lose sight of their True North. They learned the perils of putting self-interest ahead of the institutions they were chosen to lead. Most important, they learned that being authentic is the most effective and sustainable way to lead.

As we will see through their stories, today's leaders have discovered their True North and are pursuing it to the best of their abilities. And yet, leading an organization today is much more difficult than when I was CEO. Today's leaders have to cope with vastly increased pressures for short-term results and far greater legal and regulatory compliance, all of which can pull them off the course of their True North.

In reading *Discover Your True North*, you may wonder why we focus so much on your life story and on developing yourself, as opposed to leading others. As we have learned from working with many leaders, *the hardest person you will ever have to lead is yourself*. Once you are fully comfortable with who you are—and feel good in your own skin—leading others authentically becomes much easier.

Authentic leaders who follow their True North have learned from their crucibles and setbacks. They have the resilience to resist pressures and seductions. They know they must be

authentic to gain legitimacy with those with whom they work and the multiple stakeholders who have vested interests in their organizations. They are committed to building sustainable value for their institutions, while producing near-term results.

The fact that business today is far more global than it was a decade ago has significant implications for leadership throughout the world. As World Economic Forum USA chair Jean-Pierre Rosso reflected, "Today's leaders are more global, more open, and more concerned about societal issues than their predecessors."

The new generation of leaders introduced here are much more diverse than their predecessors, more global in their outlook and national origin, and more likely to be promoted from within. Many more women, people of color, and leaders who live and work outside their country of origin are among today's authentic leaders. They have global visions and a desire to make lasting contributions. As a result, authentic global leaders who understand today's global business world are rising to the top of organizations around the world.

As *Fortune's* Manager of the Century, Jack Welch has long been thought of as the prototypical leader of the twentieth century. Unilever's Paul Polman is emerging as such a leader in this new century. [Figure I.1](#) shows some of the ways this generation of leaders differs from its predecessors.

Characteristics	Twentieth-Century Leaders	Twenty-First-Century Leaders
Image	Charismatic	Purpose-driven
Focus	U.S.-centric	Global vision
Motivation	Self-interest	Institution's best interests
Experience	Perfect resume	Learning through crucibles
Time frame	Short-term	Long-term
Organizational approach	Hierarchal leadership	Distributed leadership
Greatest strength	IQ	EQ
Personal measurement	External validation	Intrinsic contribution

Figure I.1 Differences in Twentieth-Century and Twenty-First-Century Leaders

What is an authentic leader? *Authentic leaders have discovered their True North, align people around a shared purpose and values, and empower them to lead authentically to create value for all stakeholders.*

Authentic leaders are true to themselves and to what they believe in. They engender trust and develop genuine connections with others. Because people trust them, authentic leaders are able to motivate them to achieve high levels of performance. Rather than letting the expectations of others guide them, they are their own persons and go their own ways. As servant leaders, they are more concerned about serving people than about their own success or recognition.

This is not to say that authentic leaders are perfect. Far from it. All leaders have weaknesses and are subject to human frailties and mistakes. Yet by acknowledging their shortcomings and admitting their errors, their humanity and vulnerability come through, and they are able to connect with people and inspire them.

Discover Your True North is written for anyone who wants to be an authentic leader and discover his or her True North. It