

Foreword by Geoffrey Moore

Unusually Excellent

THE *NECESSARY NINE* SKILLS
REQUIRED FOR THE PRACTICE
OF GREAT LEADERSHIP



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Contents

Cover

More Praise for Unusually Excellent

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Foreword by Geoffrey Moore

Introduction

The Five W's (and One H) of Leadership
Leaders Lead

The Three Games of Leadership

The Necessary Nine

**Part One: Credibility: Earning
the Right to Lead Through
Character**

*Chapter One: Being Authentic: The
Courage to Be Yourself*

Tale of Two Leaders: Polar Opposites

Look at Life: Seeing Who You Are

Owning Your Past: The Sting of Failure

An Unexpectedly Bad Day

Share the Shame

Face Time

The Perception Gap

The Courage to Listen

Honest Feedback

Breathe and Be Yourself

Chapter Two: Being Trustworthy: The Consistency of Integrity

Poisoned Ground

Safely Successful

No Tricks Here; Just the Basics, Done Well

Implied Distrust

Should I Believe You?

A Better Place for All

A Culture of Trust Is a Culture of Truth

Bad News Doesn't Swim Upstream

A Culture of Trust Is a Culture of Innovation

A Culture of Trust Is a Culture of Performance

Take Your Pain Quickly and Acutely—and Move On

Chapter Three: Being Compelling: The Commitment to Winning

Choice and Obligation

Attracting the Best and Brightest

Keeping Your Best on Board

Cheerleader

Born-Again Employees

Tell Me the Truth

Keep Me Challenged

No Hard Feelings

Followers' Rights

Part Two: Competence: Leading on the Field With Skill

Chapter Four: Leading People: Talent to Teams

Seating Chart

People First

Get the Talent, Then Make the Plan

The E's of People Leadership

Retreat to Attack

Final Questions

Chapter Five: Leading Strategy: Ideas to Plans

Process to Plans

A TaylorMade Philosophy

The Process: Inclusive and Collaborative

Winnowing Out a Plan

The Plan: Realistic and Compelling

"Houston, We Have a Problem"

Stickiness

*Chapter Six: Leading Execution:
Action to Results*

Solve the Hard Problems First

At the Edges

Leadership Leverage in Execution

*Curb Your Enthusiasm: Focus, Commit, and
Deliver*

It Isn't Real If You Don't Measure It

Let the Dashboard Drive

*It's Just Like Pinball: If You Win, You Get to
Play Again*

*Part Three: Consequence:
Creating A Culture, Leaving A
Legacy of Values*

*Chapter Seven: A Leader's
Communication: Open, Honest
Dialogue*

Talking Trust

Checklists and Guideposts

The Solitary Touch

Your 24 × 7 Job

*Chapter Eight: A Leader's Decision
Making: Values-Based Choices*

Decision Structure
Don't Wait; Decide
Chasing Decisions

Chapter Nine: A Leader's Impact: The
Transfer of Influence from Leader to
Follower

Leader Taking the High Ground
Whisper Campaign
All You Leave Behind
Collective Memory
What to Do
Your Greatest Legacy
Another Perspective

Afterword

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Index

More Praise for Unusually Excellent

“There are many parallels between coaching a professional sports team and leading a business or civic organization. John hits the bulls eye of what is crucial to leading and winning in a high performance team environment. He lays out a model that any leader can put into action in a powerful way. This book will challenge your commitment to the disciplines that really work; but if you choose to follow these ideas, you'll be rewarded. *Unusually Excellent* belongs in every leader's office with the pages well worn from repeated readings.”

—*Steve Mariucci, former head coach, San Francisco 49ers, Detroit Lions; analyst, NFL Network*

“*Unusually Excellent* will call you to higher ground as a leader and give you the insights, context, and tools to get there. John Hamm's clear, sage advice and stark authenticity will inform your leadership decisions, large and small. And he reminds you, sometimes with a dose of tough love, of who you are at your core, and explains why some of what you do works and some doesn't. This book is a gift to my growth as a leader, and my new leadership reference manual.”

—*Ted Mitchell, CEO, The NewSchools Venture Fund; president, California State Board of Education*

“Finally! A compelling, cogent, back-to-basics book for leaders navigating the complex terrain of a global, interconnected, 24/7 world. In *Unusually Excellent*, John Hamm is an expert coach for leaders, prodding us to skip the latest fads and instead take a fresh look at the power of fundamentals, the necessary and timeless essentials of character, competence and consequence. There are

dozens of immediately usable insights here—something for everyone. This book should be on every leader's bookshelf.”

—*Linda Rottenberg, co-founder and CEO, Endeavor.Org*

“I just love *Unusually Excellent*. It's classic Hamm—insightful, compelling, and actionable. I only wish I had read this when I was starting Military.com. It's impossible to read this book and not find lots of new and powerful ideas for leading your organization. I plan to give a copy to all the CEOs I know.”

—*Chris Michel, CEO and founder, Military.Com and Affinity Labs (Monster); founder, Nautilus Ventures*

“*Unusually Excellent* is simply an *Unusually Excellent* read. It just might be the missing piece of the leadership puzzle for you as a manager at any level of your organization. John brings together the nine essentials of leadership to show you that it's not about who you are, but rather how you think and what you do. It will help you understand what leadership really means and energize your passion for leading.”

—*Michael Fitzpatrick, general partner, Seabury Ventures; former CEO, E-Tek Dynamics; former president and CEO Pacific Telesis*

“This is a significant contribution to the field. This framework of effective leadership is energizing, prescriptive, and provides a holistic view which is a must read for young as well as experienced leaders in an ever more complex world of business.”

—*Stefan Sjöström, General Manager, Public Sector, Microsoft Western Europe*

UNUSUALLY EXCELLENT

The Necessary Nine Skills
Required for the Practice
of Great Leadership

John Hamm

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To Joanna—

*An Unusually Excellent wife and partner—
She lives the values of excellence*

To our children—

*Andie, Perry, Arthur, and Taylor—
They remind us of the important things in life*

Foreword

Geoffrey Moore

Real leadership in daily practice is far from the commonly understood caricature of leadership. We don't really know what leadership means, in part because it never means quite the same thing twice. It does not always stand for great things by definition. Indeed, much of the time its most powerful acts pass unnoticed, even when we are looking for them. And although it is always demonstrated by our words and actions, those are so dependent on who we are at the time that they cannot be learned by example or by rule.

Emerson has a great line: “God *is*, not *was*.” The same is true of leadership. It is the performance in the moment, not the performance in the mind, that matters. Yes, there is preparation, and indeed, the more you prepare, the better your chances. But there is no script, or rather there are a myriad of scripts all potentially about to unfold, and you have to choose one, when you yourself are far from sure but, ideally, unwavering. And you must live with the inevitable fallibility of some of those choices, even as you can take pride in the successes of others.

To lead well, as this book makes deeply and powerfully clear, is first and foremost to know yourself, and second to put yourself in service to whatever you value most deeply. If you adopt that posture, whatever follows can be incorporated into making yourself a better leader. And it is the purpose of this book to help you do so.

There is a model provided herein-and, similar in nature to the framework I put forth in *Crossing the Chasm*, this structure allows you to locate yourself on the leadership playing field. Once you know where you are, you will see much more clearly your choices for action. In our strategy

practice at TCG Advisors with clients worldwide, we frequently see the opportunity for leaders to use tools like this to support their work.

Like a good golf instructor (which he is, by the way), John Hamm teaches by situation, by principle, and by illustration, all in one. The stories he tells, the lessons he relates, the way he takes you through the details of a performance, the way he helps you think about it once it is over and done-it is all in service to showing you what good leadership looks and feels like, and what bad leadership looks and feels like. But as with coaching in any sport, it comes down to you taking personal ownership of the outcome: you taking the risk and responsibility of action, and you owning both your successes and your shortfalls.

You can treat this book as an easy read, for it is that, but that would be a waste. Treat it instead as a call to a great adventure-your adventure-and use John as a trusted guide. Work with him to develop yourself into a powerful leader in service to something deeply worthwhile. There is no higher calling, nor anything that the world needs more in our time.

Geoffrey Moore

September 2010

Introduction

As a leadership teacher and consultant—and as a scratch golfer—one of my most interesting—and favorite—clients is TaylorMade-adidas Golf, the world's leading manufacturer of performance golf equipment.

If you play golf, or at least follow the PGA Tour, you have probably heard of TaylorMade's Performance Center in Carlsbad, California—it's known as “The Kingdom.”

Each winter, many of the world's finest professional golfers visit The Kingdom, usually with their coaches in tow, ostensibly to get precisely fitted for professional-grade metal-woods, irons, wedges, and putters. And The Kingdom offers the latest, state-of-the-art equipment—high-speed digital cameras, launch monitors, lasers, and computers—to do just that. For that task, it is the best (and certainly the most beautiful) such facility on Earth.

But there is another story to The Kingdom—one that I learned only with insider access to watch and study these PGA and LPGA pros and their coaches in action. And what I learned there is the revelation that led to the writing of this book.

You see, these golfers are the very best in their field—professional, play-for-money, dog-eat-dog competitive golf. They are the sports equivalent of Fortune 500 CEOs. The best in their business. And often, when they arrive at The Kingdom, they are frustrated or perplexed with their recent performance. Something has gone wrong with their game, and it is showing up in their scores. This problem may represent only one or two strokes per round—but at the world-class level at which these athletes play this game, that can be the difference between victory and finishing out of the money. A year or two of these kinds of problems and

they will lose their playing privileges on the professional Tour and their livelihood will have disappeared.

Inevitably, these players have their own ideas about what they are doing wrong when they arrive—and just as inevitably, those theories are misplaced.

Now, you might imagine (as I initially did) that the first thing these Tour pros and their coaches would do is to head into the lab, hook up to the test equipment, and begin measuring every detail of that golfer's swing and ball flight. But you would be wrong. In fact, what typically happens is just the opposite—and is the lowest-tech first step imaginable: golfer and coach begin by heading out to the range to hit some practice balls.

The first time I saw this I was so astonished that I found an excuse to hang around the range as well, hoping to eavesdrop on this fascinating coaching conversation. And what I heard was truly eye-opening.

What I had expected was that coach and golfer would focus on the problem at hand, analyzing and then correcting, on the spot, the errors the player believed were responsible. Instead, even when the player wanted to address “the problem” as he or she imagined it, invariably the coach politely and deceptively ignored that line of thought and instead insisted that the golfer begin with the most basic fundamentals of grip, stance, posture, ball position, and aim. I had expected to hear pearls of great wisdom; what I heard instead was the same kind of elementary instruction taking place at that moment on municipal golf courses around the country.

What was going on here? These were some of the greatest golfers on the planet, being taught by the most celebrated swing coaches alive. Why were they focusing on fundamentals that these champion golfers must have first heard when they were nine years old? Why, if the golfer thought he or she needed a slight change to their

equipment, didn't they just head into the test center and have something fabricated?

But the more I listened, the more I understood what was really going on. I began to appreciate that no matter how talented and successful the golfer, and no matter how strong their opinion about what had gone wrong, most were in fact ill-suited to diagnose their own performance. Why? Human nature. Even the best performers, in any field, will slowly—and imperceptibly—stray away from the fundamentals of their craft. This drift is almost always invisible to them. The human nature part is that losing precision in the fundamentals is exactly the *last* thing most accomplished people would imagine or will accept as the cause. Instead, left to their own devices, they look elsewhere—mostly to much more complex theories of the cause—and pursue fixes that often do more harm than good. They can't imagine that the cause of the current breakdown could be something so simple, and right in front of them. They can't imagine that they couldn't see it if it were.

Great coaches understand this. They know that the path to a solution often starts with a revisit to those fundamentals—and only then can the confusion be untangled and the problem is properly identified, isolated, and attacked. I can't tell you how many times I've watched these professional golfers, after an hour of a supervised, disciplined return to the basics, begin to hit the ball as well as they ever have, and predictably turn to their coach and say, “That was it. You're a genius.”

Sometimes that solution is as simple as where the ball is placed in relation to the player's feet—an inch or less change that the player, too close to the problem, couldn't see. Sometimes it actually is the length, weight, or lie angle of the club—and then, and only then, the golfer and coach

finally enter The Kingdom for some equipment tweaks by the equipment gurus.

As I watched this small miracle occur again and again, it struck me that I was seeing a universal truth—one that could be readily applied to the world of business management and leadership. For thirty years now, we have been inundated with endless new fads and theories about how to be a good leader. In the process, most of us have been exposed numerous times—if only under different names and in piecemeal—to all of the essential truths about leadership.

But, like those world-class golfers, even the best leaders can and do stray from those fundamentals over time—and then regularly misdiagnose the cause of the problems. They need some outside help—a fresh set of eyes—but few know it. And, like athletes, organizational leaders often struggle to see or admit their own failures. They subconsciously believe they can't reveal a weakness in their game, or that the costs to their career and their companies are too great. From there, fear sets in, they turn up the heat on themselves, and they are not inclined to look to coaches or other mentors. Instead, they push on, redoubling their efforts, denying or ignoring the results—and, like those golfers, risk amplifying their errors rather than resolving them. Like the golfer's challenge, these mistakes often occur as a small group of related errors, and then there's a domino effect: one thing leads to another, and this set of issues conspires to confound and confuse the player. It is not obvious how to untangle this new strain of problem born of several fundamentals that are out of tune. At this point, self-diagnosis is a disaster waiting to happen. To paraphrase Albert Einstein's famous quote, we can't solve a problem using the same thinking that created it. Tragically, some leaders, like some golfers, never escape their own thinking and thus don't seek outside support in the midst of this kind

of complex, self-generated mess. They are then blindly trapped in a maddening, sometimes desperate effort to find the game they once knew they had.

There is a reason that Ben Hogan's *Five Lessons: The Modern Fundamentals of Golf* remains a perennial best seller more than five decades after it was written. It is the book that serious golfers regularly revisit to walk and rewalk them through the fundamentals of their sport—the fundamentals that the finest ball striker in the history of the game knew were the essentials to great results.

I've written *Unusually Excellent* to be that book for business and organizational leadership. I know, from my coaching practice with leaders at all levels, that professional managers in all fields—whether they are just starting out, in the middle of their careers, or facing the legacy they will leave behind—need to revisit the fundamentals of their own leadership practices regularly and systematically, just as athletes do. I've written this book to be the expert coach at their side, watching them work, realigning them back to their center—which made them successful in the past, but from which they have inevitably and insidiously strayed. At this level, there are no tricks, no fads, no conceits, only the enduring touchstones of great leadership.

It is only by returning to these essentials, and newly committing to them again, that we can travel that “last mile” from being good leaders to becoming great ones. The path to that kind of greatness, to becoming an unusually excellent leader, begins right here in the pages that follow—in the Nine Essentials of leadership that can become your private coach. A coach who is always available to remind you and walk you through the fundamentals.

The Five W's (and One H) of Leadership

This is a book *for* leaders, not about them. It is about the *practice* of leadership over the course of a long career, not the theory of leadership learned over a weekend. It is not about the introduction of clever new notions of leadership, but about the *reassertion* of proven precepts. Finally, it is not an introduction to leadership, but an operating manual for all of those who are already engaged as leaders, at any level, whether at the beginning, middle, or end of their careers.

This book is the product of a quarter-century of work as a leader in companies of various sizes, from start-ups to Fortune 100 firms; and over a decade as an investor and board member evaluating and supporting leaders, as a leadership coach to CEOs, and finally as a university professor specializing in the study of leadership. During this time, I have worked in depth with more than a hundred senior leaders, most of them CEOs, and have spent more than ten thousand hours in practice on the subject of organizational leadership.

What all this experience has taught me—and what I hope imbues every page of this book—is that real practitioners of great leadership are successful by mastering a *very specific set of essential rules and practices* and behaving according to those fundamentals day after day in whatever way the environment or circumstances demand. None of these principles are new—on the contrary, they may be as old as leadership itself—but they are regularly forgotten. And even when they are remembered, they must be constantly tested and updated or they lose their power.

To excel as a leader, you not only must know what these essentials look like, but you must also understand

- *How* those essentials combine logically in an overall model of leadership
- *Why* those essentials are so important—and have always been important—in the making of great

leaders

- *What* are the underlying principles of human nature and human interaction they direct and amplify
- *When* these essentials are to be applied, both situation-specific and over the course of a professional career
- *Who* are the subjects of these essentials—that is, the people being led—and how their needs are best met and their performance maximized
- *Where* these essentials are best applied to achieve the maximum impact upon productivity, morale, force multiplication, profit—and, ultimately, reputation

The unfolding of these core principles—there are nine of them—and how they relate to one another form the heart of this book. Though often forgotten or lost in the noise, these core principles, these essentials, never change. Indeed, we can find their echoes in the stories of “unusually excellent” leaders, real and fictional, throughout history—from Odysseus to Henry V to Eisenhower—but they must be regularly rewritten to reflect the changes in context brought by culture, technology, and competition.

My goal in this book is not to teach you these essential skills *per se*, but to *remind* you of them. I say “remind” because the odds are very high that you've heard all of them before—but they were buried in the latest leadership or management fad program, or given insufficient attention compared to some other popular “truth”—or worst of all, declared obsolete, or at least anachronistic, in the modern world.

They are nothing of the sort. Rather, they are core human truths tested, refined, and purified in the fires and crucibles of war, empire, survival, and athletic competition. Not only are these principles not obsolete, they may in fact *never* be obsolete—not as long as we are human beings being led by

other human beings. Rather, the real question, the puzzle for each of us to solve, is this: *How do we apply these essentials to the unique leadership situation in which we find ourselves?*

I'm going to present these nine essential leadership skills—coiently, memorably, and, for the first time, all in one place, in logical harmony with each other. And I'm going to attack each of those lessons from different directions: case studies, psychology, anecdotes and stories, empirical evidence and logical analysis—in the belief that one or more of these will resonate with you and embed this content permanently into the way you manage your career. Finally, I'm going to put these nine diverse rules into their larger context by providing a logical, and unforgettable, taxonomy of leadership—so that you not only understand each of these essentials, but understand how they interact with each other to produce a complete model of applied leadership over the course of a full career.

Can I guarantee that, at this point in your career, you will fully understand or appreciate every concept presented in the pages to come? No. However, I'm reminded of the old adage—“We don't see things as they are, but rather as we are.” You will read this book from where you are in your life as a leader—right now. And you can read it again a year or five years from now, or the night before an important all-hands or offsite meeting with your team—and allow yourself the opportunity to tune-up all the things you know but just needed a friendly reminder of to sharpen your memory in ways that enable your best work. Becoming aware of the subtle difference between you at your best and you at your normal is sometimes exactly what the situation calls for, and can make the difference between something ordinary and something extraordinary.

That said, even the young junior manager in his or her first leadership job will come away from this book having at least

been exposed to all of the nine essentials of leadership, positioned in a framework that will resonate with their logical understanding and experience of the world—and will have them in hand when needed. As for the veteran manager, many of the lessons in this book will be a reinforcement of what he or she already knows, perhaps articulated in a powerful new way not seen before. For the veteran, however, the final section of the book will address topics—reputation, legacy, and consequences—that are rarely even spoken of, much less put into the pages of a book. These are the quiet conversations that, until now, successful men and women typically have only with themselves, a trusted mentor, or a spouse. I've decided to take them head-on. And because many veteran leaders only discover—to their dismay—that building a reputation starts at the beginning of a career, not at its end, this book serves as a timely heads-up to young leaders as well.

Leaders Lead

Besides a tendency to ignore the proven lessons of the past, fad leadership theories also usually treat leadership as a kind of tool kit, a grab-bag of predetermined moves that magically appear at the right moment to fit the right problem and can be executed mechanistically.

Nothing could be further from the truth. As I'm going to show you, true leadership is an organic process, as much the product of character as of technique. It doesn't exist in discrete moments, but is made manifest over the course of a career of leading people. And it isn't a single concept, but a phenomenological *field*—that is, it is composed of actions, ideas, emotions, cultural forces, history, and expectations that exist together in a system. Yes, understanding leadership is a systems understanding—nothing happens in a silo.

You also can't just pull out “leadership technique number four” and swing it at a random problem. For one thing, the theoretical solution is almost always a poor fit to the messy real-life problem you face. Moreover, *leaders lead*: you can't just pick up a tool and expect it to work on its own; *you have to learn how to apply it*. To assume that an ambitious manager can attend a seminar on employee motivation and then go back and effectively implement those ideas, is like handing a 4-iron to someone who has never played golf but has watched it on TV, and expecting him or her to hit the ball cleanly through an opening in the trees back to the fairway.

Finally, management challenges, crises—and even opportunities—are not distinct events. There is rarely a precise moment when one can be said to begin; and they are rarely ever fully solved. Instead, they often emerge (as you only discover later) slowly and surreptitiously—until they suddenly burst on the scene, demanding a solution. By the same token, their resolution is almost always incomplete—and what remains unsolved sows the seeds of the next set of challenges, crises, and opportunities.

My belief, confirmed over decades of working with some of the world's top business leaders, is that leadership is enduring, dynamic, and simple in theory but complex in execution; that it is a lifelong or career-long journey of mastery; and that, like other deeply personal commitments of service, there is no particular destination, no end zone or finish line. It is the learning—and the satisfaction in knowing that you are more skilled and effective this year than you were last, and so on, looking forward—that keeps this a game worth playing, and makes the time you'll spend leading a worthy and noble use of your time and energy, and worth the opportunity cost of the alternatives in front of you.

It is in recognition of this continuum that I tend to stay away from using the notion of nine “rules” of leadership and instead use terms like “essentials” and “principles”—because this time-tested wisdom only serves as the ground on which a host of other factors must be deployed to construct short-term solutions and long-term strategies. Put another way, the Nine Essentials of this book are only a framework—albeit a tested and effective one—on which to hang all of the other situational and timely factors that constitute great leadership. These principles are the base from which leaders can tap all of their other faculties, experiences, intuition, and resources to help the organization move forward at the maximum safe rate of speed. However, to get these wrong, or to not honor their place in the solution, is to fall for the temptation of what simply won't work.

The Three Games of Leadership

As you're already discovering—mainly because I tend to use athletic metaphors—I am a huge sports fan and student of athletic excellence. And as the TaylorMade story suggests, as much as I admire great athletes and what they can do, I'm equally impressed by the best coaches and managers.

Just as sports—with its clearly defined rules, competition, heroics, and winners and losers—is a proxy for the larger world, coaching is a specific instance of leadership. Years of preparation, of recruiting, team-building, and training, can go out the window with a handful of poorly planned or poorly executed plays; and the most carefully crafted strategy can be voided by an injury just moments after the game begins.

Great coaches have an astounding skill for dealing with wide spectra of time and experience. When they are building the team, their perspective can extend years into

the future. Yet during a game their decisions are made in real time and the impact is measured in minutes or seconds. Similarly, they go many months on a very predictable schedule running workouts and holding meetings—only to find themselves in the chaos of a game, enduring the most unpredictable and stressful work imaginable. And, let us not forget, they constantly live with the knowledge that, though the odds are against their ever being victorious, their customers (fans) expect them to win every game, and they are haunted by the realization that one mistake could end their careers and fortunes.

Coaches and managers are thus continuously tested in the crucible of leadership. As such, to survive, they need to maintain, literally, the ultimate “view of the field.” This expanded view enables them to parse, plan, and prioritize their time, their energy, and their actions in preparation for each game, during the game, and in the game's aftermath.

This means that for them—and for you—there isn't just one, but *three* fields of play occurring simultaneously as you lead your organization. I believe it is absolutely essential that, as a leader, you are always mindful of these three distinct domains of leadership skills and appreciate that you continuously attend to each.

That's why there are three major sections of this book.

Part One, *Credibility*, is a matter of *character*. Leaders are at all times engaged in the process of establishing or earning, affirming or restoring, ruining or fixing, dismantling or cementing their *right to lead*—their leadership equity, their organizational loyalty.

Ultimately, this right can be exercised only if you have established your *credibility* with those you ask to follow you—and (if necessary) with those who confer on you the role of leader. On the one hand, although the *authority* to lead is a structural consequence of hierarchical or positional power granted legally or by decree, over time it is wholly

inadequate to achieve the results to which most leaders aspire; the most talented people are never led by authority, and the best effort of the entire organization is at risk in a context of command and control. Credibility, on the other hand, is the sinew that binds teams to leaders, individually and collectively, and ultimately prepares both for the unavoidable tough times that will inevitably strain this relationship.

Credibility can be established by almost anyone for a short period of time. But it can be sustained only if those you lead genuinely *trust* you—and earning and maintaining that trust ultimately comes down to one thing: your character as a person and as a leader. In the end, as the ancients have taught us for millennia, character is destiny.

Part Two, Competence, is a matter of *skill*. Leaders are expected to be highly skilled regarding the tasks, processes, conversations, and judgments that create the intended results. The assets and techniques at the leader's disposal are people, strategies, and the management of execution. We expect our leaders to deploy these assets and use these tools skillfully—and in return we offer them our time and talents. And we hold our leaders accountable for their ability to create and increase the value of the enterprise—or at least that part of the organization they lead.

Credibility is the starting line, the “ante” into the game of leadership. However, as an example, we would never allow a doctor to treat us if we did not believe that he or she was, first and foremost, professionally competent, regardless of our affinity for him or her personally. Ultimately, and contrary to common wisdom, that competence trumps how authentic, trustworthy, or compelling we perceive that person to be. Leaders who are real winners attract followers with their credibility; they keep them on the team with their competence. It is only on the field, in the thick of the game, that we also begin to separate how we feel about a leader