



BILL GEORGE

Professor at Harvard Business School; former CEO, Medtronic Inc.; author of *True North* (Jossey-Bass, April)



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RESOLVED:

The hardest person you will ever have to lead is yourself.

GEORGE: Leaders who fail often do so because they fall prey to the pressures and seductions they face. It isn't that they lack leadership skills, style, or power—but that their egos, their greed, their craving for public adulation, and their fear of loss of power overwhelm their responsibility to build their institutions. In contrast, authentic leaders understand that leading is about serving others and bringing them together around a common cause.

KOPP: At Teach for America, we know that teaching successfully is an act of leadership. I often hear our corps members and alumni describe the moment they broke through as a teacher as the moment they realized that this work is not about them, but rather about their students. The best leaders keep focused on the outcomes they're trying to achieve, resisting the very human temptation to get distracted by issues of ego and insecurity.

GEORGE: Likewise, I believe that great leaders are also excellent teachers. I wonder, would actually thinking of themselves as teachers help leaders be more effective? What can we learn from teachers about our own leadership?

KOPP: The most successful teachers set a vision for their students' achievement that many think to be unreasonable. They motivate others—their students and the students' parents—to work harder than they've ever worked before to realize that vision. They are purposeful and effective in planning and executing toward that vision, work relentlessly to tackle the immense challenges that inevitably arise, and reflect constantly on their students' performance and their own practice. In other words, they do what the most effective leaders do in any context. What I wonder is to what extent this sort of leadership is inherent in people, and how much can be developed over time. We're still sorting out the answer.

GEORGE: Is leadership inherent or trainable? Both. You are *born* with characteristics that reside deep inside you: drive, an ability to influence and motivate, perseverance. But you have to *develop* those qualities through actual leadership experiences. A key quality is *adaptability*—facing unexpected obstacles, falling short of goals, reading the context, and changing your approach. Absent that, leaders will continue to repeat mistakes and will not grow and develop. That leads me to the essence of the question “Why is it so hard to lead *yourself*?” The answer, in my experience, lies in the differences between your idealized self—how you see yourself and how you want to be seen—and your real self. The key to growing as a leader is to narrow that gap by developing a deep self-awareness that comes from straight feedback and honest exploration of yourself, followed by a concerted effort to make changes.

KOPP: That takes me back to where we started: When people are acutely aware that their mission is not about maintaining an image of themselves, but rather about achieving ambitious ends in an important pursuit, it becomes critical to evolve in whatever way necessary to serve the larger cause. It's very natural to get caught up inside our heads—to think more about how people are perceiving us than about what we need to do to realize our goals. When that happens, it's critical to step back and recenter ourselves in what really matters.

WENDY KOPP

President, Teach for America; featured in George's *True North*

