

THE
STUDENT
LEADERSHIP
CHALLENGE

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Leadership defined:

**Leadership is the art
of mobilizing others
to want to struggle
for shared
aspirations.**

Introduction: When People Are at Their Best as Leaders

You don't have to be a superstar or an overachiever to lead; you just need to care about something and do something about it. It doesn't have to be big, just do something. Every great change starts small. You just need to take that first step, not because you necessarily have the authority or responsibility, but because you care.

—Elliese Judge, Panama City, Panama

This was the thinking that got Elliese Judge going. When she was nineteen, she helped start a nonprofit organization called Arvita that continues to focus on improving environmental awareness through organic recycling and sustainable reforestation.¹

Elliese was born in Australia and moved with her family to Panama when she was fourteen. When she got a part-time job at a Panama City bank she wanted to recycle some of the papers in the office. “While I was working there,” Elliese told us, “I realized how inconvenient it was to recycle and how nobody seemed to think it was important. There was no truck or pick-up; you had to take everything to the landfill yourself and nobody wanted to be bothered.”

When Elliese went to the landfill she met some of the people in the community who were living right next to it. The whole neighborhood smelled terrible and this bothered her deeply. She realized that her family and others like it were producing a great deal of waste that was being dumped directly next to these people. That didn't feel right. Her new perspective on the whole cycle of waste in the country deepened her belief that this was a significant issue, a problem that needed to be addressed. So she decided to do something about it, first at the bank, then in her own home, and from there the idea started to grow, bit by bit.

As Elliese talked about it more with her friends, she found there were others who shared her passion. When she met Milko Dilgado while camping with friends at an Ecological Music Festival, they quickly discovered they were both passionate about the environment and eager to do something to make a difference in protecting and restoring it. So they began a very simple organic recycling project in Elliese's backyard: a simple worm farm they started from scratch with a pound of worms. From that modest beginning their vision for a more eco-friendly Panama began to take form. As they looked more deeply into all the organic waste being produced they discovered that it could be used to regenerate growth in deforested areas. They saw a connection between the issues of bad waste management and the rampant deforestation throughout Panama that their project could address. They kept asking themselves: "Once we recycle all this organic waste, turning it into fertilizer, can't we find a way to put it to good use?"

Elliese and Milko started visiting restaurants, sharing with them the negative impacts that restaurant waste had on people and the environment, and explaining the positive impacts it could have in reforestation. They believed that by showing people a different picture of how things might work to help Panama, they could influence restaurant owners, employees, and customers to act in more

responsible ways towards the environment. The idea was that through Arvita, restaurants would be able to play a part in restoring Panama's forests by separating their organic waste and donating it to the foundation's recycling effort. Arvita would take the restaurants' organic waste and turn it into compost, fertilizers, and raw material for their worm farm. The products would then be used to support the planting of native trees and bringing animals back to deforested areas. "Our vision," explains Elliese, "is that every restaurant in Panama will be eco-friendly, do organic recycling, and support sustainable reforestation."

Starting Arvita was not without challenges. Environmental awareness and consciousness were relatively low in Panama. There were few young people driving change of any sort in Panama to serve as role models, and Elliese and her colleagues encountered skepticism about whether people their age could have a significant impact on environmental issues. But Elliese and Milko recognized that each time they connected with a restaurant, explaining the degrading effects of their waste on the environment and the positive change possible from recycling organic waste, the direct connection made a difference, and so they continued promoting environmental awareness restaurant by restaurant.

Elliese's story speaks to a fundamental question: When does leadership begin? The answer is that leaders seize the moment. Elliese saw an opportunity and took it, first in the bank where she had a part-time job, and then with Milko with the backyard worm farm. Those fairly small opportunities transformed into something much greater. Elliese and Milko didn't wait for someone to appoint either of them as "the" leader. They recognized an issue, had a passion for it, found others with a similar vision, and just got started. Then they kept going. Although leadership, just like any other skill in life, can be learned and strengthened through coaching and practice, you don't have to wait for that support and preparation to happen before you start

to lead. In fact, no amount of coaching or practice can make much of a difference if you don't care about doing or making something better than it currently is.

Everyone has the capacity to lead whether or not they are in a formal position of authority or even part of an organized group.² That's what we mean when we say leadership is everyone's business. It is not about being a president, captain, director, editor, CEO, general, or prime minister. It's not about celebrity, wealth, or even age. It's not about your family background or the neighborhood you come from. It's about knowing your values and those of the people around you and taking the steps, however small, to make what you do every day demonstrate that you live by those values.

As we continue to learn from Elliese's leadership experience, it is clear that leadership is about transforming values and goals into action. The operational side of bringing an effort like Arvita to life was brand-new territory for Elliese and Milko. They started with lots of passion and plans but turning them into a reality seemed overwhelming. "We didn't know where to start," Elliese said. "We had tons of energy and ideas, but making it happen seemed overwhelming." Elliese told us about several things she and Milko did that helped them get going. For example, they knew enough to realize that there was much they didn't know, and so they took the time to visit farms in the area that were doing sustainable agriculture, asked a lot of questions, and learned from the farmers themselves. They knew that they couldn't get everyone to change right away, or to care about the environment like they did, so they took a one-step-at-a-time approach. To start, they found one restaurant that was willing to experiment with their recycling program. Armed with that success, they lobbied more to join. They found an arborist who agreed to help them design a reforestation plan for half his usual fee because he was so taken with the foundation's plans and the determination he saw in Elliese and Milko to have those plans succeed. They produced a documentary film to promote

Arvita and environmental awareness; in the process they interviewed political figures and other environmental entrepreneurs in Panama, thereby starting a network of support for the foundation. All the while they worked hard to get more young people interested in working with them as volunteers.

In addition, they each took the time at the beginning to write out their personal reasons for wanting to build the foundation. Elliese said: “That helped a lot because we now understand what motivates and challenges us individually and collectively and we can keep that in our minds as we go about our business.” They also made it a point to provide encouragement to everyone involved in the foundation and its various projects, because they realize how important such support is in helping everyone to keep going as they struggle to reach their aspirations. What’s more, Elliese told us, she and Milko appreciate that there isn’t a single leader in their organization; everyone takes the lead in different ways. For example, Milko is the one who generally gets out to the environmental fairs around Panama to talk about Arvita. He is not necessarily the one you’d think should do that, Elliese says, because she is, by her own admission, “the talker.” Milko is rather shy and reserved and has a stutter. But when they go to the fairs, he’s the one who is most passionate in speaking and getting people excited about what they are trying to do. “He takes this risk,” Elliese points out, “and I let him know how much I appreciate it. We all tell one other that when we do things that move us forward. We’re a team.”

Early in their partnership, Elliese and Milko realized the value of acknowledging how others contribute to the success of their organization. They understood how recognizing the part that Arvita volunteers and business partners play strengthens relationships and builds a positive reputation for their organization and the values it espouses. For example, Elliese makes it a goal in every interaction to treat with respect the people they work with. She

told us about how she once gave someone a great big “thank you” even though that person had ignored her for forty-five minutes before attending to her business. Elliese observes that “people will almost always help you if you make them feel respected, valued, and part of something. I showed that person my gratitude for her time and let her see how her actions were not just helping me, but helping our country.”

Elliese and Milko’s experience shows something we have seen over and over: leadership begins when you find something you care about. It doesn’t necessarily require an organization, a budget, a hierarchy, a position, or a title. “The most important thing,” Elliese says, “is to believe in yourself and not be afraid to take a risk. If you believe in something passionately chances are there are others who do as well. Go for it, even if it fails you’ll know you tried and you’ll learn something. Nothing wrong with that!”

Of course there are challenges, but leaders like Elliese and Milko face them one at a time and make progress in their unique way. Leadership potential is lost when people are convinced that there is just one straight path and one certain type of person that is destined for success. You don’t need to be perfect to start anything; you simply need passion, initiative, and the desire to make a difference.

THE FIVE PRACTICES OF EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP

In undertaking the establishment of their nonprofit organization, Elliese seized an opportunity to make a difference. And although her story is exceptional, it is not unique. We’ve been conducting original research all over the globe for more than thirty years, and we’ve discovered that such achievements are actually commonplace. When we ask young leaders to tell us about their Personal-Best

Leadership Experiences—experiences that they believe are their individual standards of excellence—there are thousands of success stories just like this one.³ We’ve found them everywhere, and it proves that leadership knows no ethnic or cultural borders, no racial or religious bounds, no differences between young and old. Leaders reside in every city and every country, in every function and every organization. Exemplary leadership can be found everywhere we look.

After analyzing these leadership experiences, we discovered, and continue to find, that regardless of the times or setting, people who guide others along new journeys follow surprisingly similar paths. Though each experience was unique in its individual expression, there were clearly identifiable behaviors and actions that made a difference. When getting extraordinary things done with others, leaders engage in what we call The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

These practices are not the private property of the people we studied. Nor do they belong to a few select shining stars. Leadership is not about personality or popularity and it’s not about age; it’s about behavior. The Five Practices are available to anyone who accepts the leadership challenge. This includes you! The leadership challenge is the challenge of taking people to places they have never been before, and doing something that has never been done before. It is the challenge of moving beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary, regardless of your setting, environment, or circumstances.

The Five Practices have passed the test of time, even though the *context* of leadership has changed dramatically while we have been doing our research. Technological advances, shifts in the world's economies, and social changes all influence the context in which you will lead. We also know that such changes will continue at a rapid pace. And yet, while the leadership environment has changed, the *content* of leadership has not changed much at all. Our research tells us that the fundamental behaviors, actions, and practices of effective leaders have remained essentially the same and are as relevant today as they were when we first began our study of exemplary leadership.

When you explore The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership in depth in Chapters 2 through 11, you'll find examples from the real-life experiences of people like Elliese and Milko who have accepted the leadership challenge. But first, let's begin with a brief overview of each of The Five Practices.

Model the Way

Titles are granted, but it's your behavior that earns you respect. This sentiment was shared across all the cases we collected. Exemplary leaders know that if they want to gain commitment and achieve the highest standards, they must be models of the behavior they expect of others.

To effectively Model the Way you must first be clear about your own guiding principles. You must *clarify values by finding your voice*. When you understand who you are and what your values are, then you can give voice to those values. Finding your voice encourages others to do the same, paving the way for understanding. But *your* values aren't the only values that matter. In every team, organization, and community, there are others who also feel strongly about matters of principle. As a leader, you also must help identify and *affirm the shared values* of

the group. Leaders' actions are far more important than their words when others want to determine how serious leaders really are about what they say. Words and actions must be consistent. Exemplary leaders *set the example by aligning actions with shared values*. Through their daily actions they demonstrate their deep commitment to their beliefs and to the groups they are part of. One of the best ways to prove that something is important is by doing it yourself and setting an example, by "walking the talk."

Inspire a Shared Vision

People describe their personal-best leadership experiences as times when they imagined an exciting, better future for themselves and others. They had visions and dreams of what *could* be. They had absolute and total personal belief in those dreams, and they were confident in their abilities to find a way to make extraordinary things happen. Every organization, every social movement, every big event begins with a dream. The dream, or vision, is the force that creates the future.

Leaders *envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities*. You need to make something happen, to change the way things are, to create something new and exciting. In some ways, this means having a real sense of the past and also a clear vision of what the results should look like before starting any project regardless of size and scope, much as an architect draws a blueprint or an engineer builds a model. But you can't command commitment to a new future, as exciting as it may seem to you; you have to inspire it. You have to *enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations*. You can do this by talking to others and, even more important, listening to them to understand what motivates them. You enlist others by helping them feel they are part of something that matters, something that will make a difference, and something that you all believe is important to

accomplish together. When you express your enthusiasm and excitement for the vision, you ignite a similar passion in others.

Challenge the Process

Challenge is the spark for greatness. Every single personal-best leadership case involved a change from the status quo. Not one person claimed to have achieved a personal best by keeping things the same. The challenge might have been launching an innovative new event, tackling a problem in a different way, rethinking a service their group provides, creating a successful campaign to get students to join an environmental program, starting up a brand-new student group or team, achieving a revolutionary turnaround of a university policy, or getting a new event under way with the intent that it become a new school tradition. It could also be dealing with daily obstacles and challenges, such as finding ways to solve a group conflict or attack a major class project.

Leaders are willing to step out into the unknown. But leaders aren't the only creators or originators of new ideas, projects, services, or processes. In fact, it's more likely that they're not. Innovation comes more from listening than from telling. You must constantly be looking outside of yourself and your group for new and innovative ways to do things. You need to *search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve*. Because innovation and change involve *experimenting and taking risks*, your major contributions as a leader will be to encourage experimentation and idea generation, to recognize and support the best of those ideas, and to be willing to challenge the system.

Mistakes and failures will be inevitable, but proceed anyway. One way of dealing with the potential risks and failures of experimentation is *by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience*. There's a strong correlation between the actions of leaders and the

process of learning; the best leaders are the simply the best learners.⁴ Leaders are constantly learning from their errors and failures and helping the groups they are part of to do the same. Life is the leader's laboratory, and exemplary leaders use it to conduct as many experiments as possible.

Enable Others to Act

A grand dream doesn't come true through the actions of a single person. It requires a team effort. It requires solid trust and strong relationships. It requires deep competence and cool confidence. It requires group collaboration⁵ and individual accountability. No leader ever got anything extraordinary done by working solo. True leadership is a team effort.

Leaders *foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships*. They believe in the potential of others and the power of collaboration. They act on those beliefs by bringing people together and trusting that old truth that "together we achieve more." Leaders do what it takes to give people the confidence and competence they need to face the challenges ahead, to support each other and move together toward success. They engage all those who must make the project work—and in some way, all who must live with the results. People don't perform at their best nor do they stick around for very long if you make them feel unimportant, weak, or alienated. By promoting the development of personal power and ownership, and by giving your power away, you make others stronger and more capable. When you *strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence* they are more likely to give it their all and exceed their own expectations. By focusing on serving the needs of others, and not your own, you build people's trust in you as a leader. And the more people trust their leaders, and each other, the more they take risks, make changes, and keep organizations, projects, teams,

and movements alive. When people are trusted and have more choice in how they do their work, more authority, and more information, they're much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results. Through that relationship, leaders turn others into leaders themselves.

Encourage the Heart

Achieving great change is a long and bumpy road. People become exhausted, frustrated, disillusioned and are often tempted to give up or disengage. They may ask themselves, "Is all this work really worth it?" Genuine acts of caring give people the heart to keep going.

Leaders *recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence*. It can be one to one or with many people. It can come from dramatic gestures or simple actions. It's part of your responsibility as a leader to show appreciation for people's contributions and to create a place where people can *celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community*. Recognition and celebration aren't necessarily about fun and games, though there is a lot of fun and there are a lot of games when people encourage the hearts of others. Neither are they necessarily about formal awards. Ceremonies designed to create the "official" recognition can be effective, but only if they are perceived as sincere. Encouragement is valuable and important because it connects what people have done with the successes the group has to celebrate. Make sure that people appreciate how their behavior is connected with their values and the values of the group. Celebrations and rituals, when done sincerely and from the heart (as opposed to doing them just because you have to or because they have always been done), give a group a strong sense of identity and team spirit that can carry it through tough times.

The Ten Commitments of Exemplary Leadership

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are the core leadership competencies that emerged from analyzing thousands of personal-best

The Five Practices and Ten Commitments of Exemplary Leadership

Model the Way

1. Clarify values by finding your voice and affirming shared values.
2. Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

Inspire a Shared Vision

3. Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
4. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

Challenge the Process

5. Search for opportunities by seizing the initiative and by looking outward for innovative ways to improve.
6. Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from experience.

Enable Others to Act

7. Foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships.
8. Strengthen others by increasing self-determination and developing competence.

Encourage the Heart

9. Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
10. Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

leadership cases. When leaders are doing their best they Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart.

Embedded in The Five Practices are behaviors that can serve as the basis for learning to lead. We call these The Ten Commitments of Exemplary Leadership. They focus on actions you need to apply to yourself and that you need to take with others.

These ten commitments serve as the guide for explaining, understanding, appreciating, and learning how leaders get extraordinary things done with others, and we discuss each of them in depth in Chapters 2 through 11. But, what's the evidence that these practices, commitments, and behaviors really matter? Do they truly make a difference in how we lead others to create change? The research we've done makes the case that they do.

The Five Practices Make a Difference

The truth is that exemplary leader behavior makes a profoundly positive difference in people's commitment and the way they do their work. In getting a higher level of commitment and performance, student leaders who more frequently use The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership are considerably more effective than those who don't.

In other words, the way young leaders behave is what explains how hard people work and how engaged they feel in the work they are doing. Our research tells us that the more you use The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, the more likely it is that you'll have a positive influence on others and on their efforts and commitment to their group, team, campus, or cause. That's what all the data adds up to. If you want to have a significant impact on people, on organizations, and on communities, you need to invest in

learning the behaviors that enable you to become the very best leader you can be.

Here's something else we found from the constituents of student leaders: the more frequently they reported that student leaders were engaging in The Five Practices the more they reported being satisfied with that person's leadership and proud to tell others that they were working with this leader. In addition, they were more likely to feel appreciated and valued, to agree that their efforts were making a difference, and to feel that they were highly productive. And, by the way, the leaders benefited significantly because their constituents (typically their peers) viewed them as more effective as a direct function of their use of The Five Practices. Constituents who indicated that the leadership skills of their student leader were not very developed compared with peers indicated that the use of The Five Practices by these student leaders was nearly 35–50 percent lower than reported about more effective student leaders. Our research also revealed something else that's extremely important: the effective use of The Five Practices is not affected by gender, ethnicity, age, or year in school.⁶

To sum it all up: what matters as a leader is how you behave.

You Make a Difference

It's very clear that engaging in The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership makes a significant difference—no matter who you are or what you are leading. How you behave as a leader matters, and it matters a lot. It makes a difference. You make a difference. We believe it is the right, and even the responsibility, of all young people to look into their hearts, determine what they believe in, and by acting on that belief make the world a better place. In the chapters that follow, we'll provide you the ideas, tool, and techniques that will serve you well on any leadership journey.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all stories and quotations are from student leaders around the world who shared with us, in their own words, their personal-best leadership experiences, their most admired leaders, and the lessons they have learned about leadership. Their stories are used with their permission. Many will have moved on, and the organizations in which some of their personal-best experiences occurred may no longer exist by the time you read this, but the details on their roles, organizations, and experiences were accurate at the time of this writing.
2. When we use the term *group* we mean any collective organization a student is a member of or is leading: an athletic team, a club or common-interest group, any specialized activity or project, an academic team, or even a class group. We also use the word *leaders* to refer to students we have studied, not just students in formal leadership positions but students who have taken the challenge and worked with others to make extraordinary things happen in groups to which they belong.
3. Visit <http://www.studentleadershipchallenge.com> for continuing updates on personal-best leadership stories from young leaders around the world. For detailed information on our research methodology, the theory and evidence behind The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership, our research methodology, our personal-best questionnaire, the psychometric properties of our Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) and reports on our analysis of our data, please see the research section of our website: <http://www.leadershipchallenge.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-131060.html>.
4. J. M. Kouzes and B. Z. Posner, *The Truth About Leadership: The No-Fads, Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).
5. Throughout this book we use *cooperate* and *collaborate* synonymously. Their dictionary definitions are very similar. In *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition (2001), the first definition of *cooperate* is "To act or work with another or others: act together" (p. 254). The first definition of *collaborate* is "To work jointly with others or together esp. in an intellectual endeavor" (p. 224).
6. B. Z. Posner, "The Impact of Gender, Ethnicity, School Setting, and Experience on Student Leadership: Does It Really Matter?" Paper presented

at the Western Academy of Management, Santa Fe, NM, March, 2013. See also B. Z. Posner, “Effectively Measuring Student Leadership,” *Administrative Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2012): 221–234, doi:10.3390/admsci2040221; and B. Z. Posner, “What Does the Research Show About Student Leadership?” Paper presented at The Leadership Challenge Forum, San Diego, CA, August, 2010.