Introducing

Leadership and the Art of Struggle

How Great Leaders Grow through Challenge and Adversity

Steven Snyder

Foreword by Bill George, author of True North

Leadership and the Art of Struggle shatters leadership myths to reveal a new understanding of how exceptional leaders grow from adversity. Realize your potential as a leader with this powerful lens.

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“Leadership and the Art of Struggle is the must-read leadership book of the year. It is one of the most intelligent, revealing, and practical books on the subject I have ever read. Buy this book immediately, read it with a sense of urgency, and apply it with the commitment of a disciple. You and those you work with will benefit greatly when you do.”

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“Leadership and the Art of Struggle provides you with the opportunity to learn from Snyder’s remarkable wisdom”

—from the Foreword by Bill George, Former CEO Medtronic, professor of Management Practice, Harvard Business School, best-selling author of True North

About Steven Steven Snyder is the founder of Snyder Leadership Group, an organizational consulting firm dedicated to cultivating inspired leadership. Snyder was an early executive at Microsoft, where he managed the company’s relationship with IBM, and then went on to become the first general manager of a business unit. Later, Snyder became CEO of the internet startup, Net Perceptions where he was awarded the first ever World Technology Award for Commerce for “contributing to the advance of emerging technologies for the benefit of business and society.” Snyder holds an MBA from the Harvard Business School and a doctorate in psychology from the University of Minnesota.
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Introduction

I was spellbound watching the first public demonstration of the Lisa, Apple’s first computer with a graphical user interface (GUI). Steve Jobs had introduced the Lisa to journalists in New York City the week before, and his presentations had been electrifying. The event I attended in January 1983, which took place at the old New England Life Hall, was hosted by the Boston Computer Society, the world’s largest computer user group. Like many in the audience, I had been eagerly anticipating the arrival of this bold new technology that promised to bring us to the cusp of a new age of computing.

What I did not know then was that, behind his charisma and bravado, Jobs was deeply conflicted and struggling on multiple levels. He had been thrown off the Lisa team because of detrimental, counterproductive behavior. Even as he was publicly extolling the virtues of the Lisa, he was doing everything he could within Apple to undermine its success in favor of the Macintosh. Adding to the irony on a personal level, the Lisa had been named for the daughter whom Jobs had abandoned, just as he himself had been abandoned by his own parents as an infant. In May 1985, Jobs’s aggressive, disrespectful, take-no-prisoners management style would contribute to his losing a power struggle with John Sculley—the chief executive officer that he had handpicked, wooed, and once called friend. Disillusioned and despondent, he left the company he had helped to found.
The Steve Jobs who emerged two decades later to deliver the 2005 Stanford University commencement address was a very different person. He had confronted his struggles, personal and professional, and had navigated through a number of challenges. He was on his way to becoming one of the most influential leaders of our time. Even though he died tragically young in 2011, his life is a testament to personal growth, leadership development, and human potential. Not only did Jobs push the boundaries of what was considered possible, he radically changed our thinking about leadership and innovation. He maximized his own contribution, left us wondering what more might have followed, and inspired us to see the benefits of shifting our perspective and thinking in new ways. Through his struggles Jobs had redefined his purpose in life and transformed his leadership energies in service to this core purpose.

Steve Jobs was not a perfect man or a perfect leader. He was a leader who struggled, like all of us, and whose life and leadership illustrated the developmental metamorphosis that is available to us all. All we need to do is choose it.

**Viewing Struggle as an Art**

Leadership is often a struggle. Yet societal taboos often prevent leaders from talking openly and honestly about their struggles for fear of being perceived as ineffective and inadequate. Social mores reinforce the myth that leaders are supposed to be perfect and that struggle is a sign of weakness and a source of shame. It is hard to keep these societal views in perspective, especially when facing significant challenges. This cultural programming, learned over many years, becomes ingrained, causing some leaders to lose their confidence and doubt their abilities, thinking something is wrong with them.

The best leaders learn to sidestep these unrealistic expectations by accepting themselves for who they are today while continually striving to be better tomorrow. These individuals come to understand that struggle is a natural part of leadership and that it is often the struggle itself that unlocks the potential for the greatest growth. Instead of denying the struggle or feeling diminished by it, they learn to embrace it as an art to be mastered. Consequently, they develop skills, capabilities, and practices that help them cope with—and even thrive in the midst of—challenge and adversity.

Everyone is at their own unique stage in the leadership continuum and in their mastery of the art of struggle. Some leaders, especially those who are just starting out, may not be aware that their behavior is counterproductive. They have no self-regulatory mechanism, no brakes. Some are so oblivious that they just plunge ahead until they run into a brick wall. They have no awareness of how their own choices and blind spots get them into trouble, and they blame others for their misfortune.

Some continue to repeat the same mistakes over and over. They go from one job to another, acting out the same patterns, reenacting the same scripts. As these scripts play out, they produce the same predictable, unsatisfactory results. Yet they lack the insight to connect the dots between their own unenlightened behavior and the unfavorable outcomes they grumble about.

Great leaders use failure as a wake-up call. Instead of blaming others, they seek out the counsel of a mentor and/or turn their attention inward for reflection and introspection. They become aware of how their own behaviors and practices contribute to undesirable outcomes and resolve to break from past habits, to begin anew. The next time they encounter the same constellation of circumstances, they try a different approach. Choosing a new script frees them from the prison of stale thinking and unproductive behavior and leads to an understanding of how they can work with others to achieve some larger purpose or mission.
As these awakened individuals advance on their leadership journey, they gradually view themselves and their role as leaders in fundamentally different ways than they did earlier in their careers. They reach a place where they view leadership as an enriching, deeply human experience. They derive happiness and fulfillment from not only their successes but also the intrinsic nature of the journey itself.

My goal is to meet you where you are right now and guide you to take your leadership to the next level. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or intimidated at any point in the process, I urge you to press forward. I truly believe that you will come to look forward to the challenges that await you, with anticipation, eagerness, and a newfound sense of confidence. Whether you feel self-conscious or self-assured, you will learn about potential pitfalls in the road ahead and how best to avoid them.

If you are immersed in a difficult leadership challenge and feeling trapped in a situation that seems beyond your control, the ideas and the exercises in this book can help reignite your sense of empowerment and spur you to brainstorm creative new solutions. Even if you consider yourself an accomplished leader with an extensive résumé of achievements, the insights you glean from these pages may expand your view of leadership and better equip you to coach others through their own struggles.

Ultimately, I am confident that you will find value in this book because it is a synthesis of collective wisdom from extraordinary leaders. They have gone through the same struggles you have. They have found the paths that are best for them. I am certain that you will find the path that is best for you.

Fulfilling your potential as a leader requires that you think differently about leadership. You must recast your struggles as positive learning experiences and view them as necessary steps in your development as a leader. You must look at leadership through an entirely different lens.

Leadership through a Different Lens

Some years ago I heard a former classmate of mine, Joe Badaracco, speak about a course he was teaching at Harvard Business School. He and his students studied leadership through the lens of literature. Instead of the usual case studies, the course examined the lives of fictional characters in literary works such as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*, and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Badaracco’s premise was that fiction opens a new portal on leadership, deepening the understanding of leadership as a human endeavor, a reality that is often absent in other leadership approaches.

By delving into the raw humanity of these flawed yet often heroic characters, Badaracco guided his students to a compelling insight:

*Leadership is a struggle by flawed human beings to make some important human values real and effective in the world as it is.*

This concept may push some people out of their comfort zone. In a world influenced by relentlessly upbeat urgings, leaders may feel awkward about acknowledging that they struggle. It is understandable that leaders may be too deeply embarrassed to reveal their flaws—or to admit that they even have flaws. This reluctance is why Badaracco’s lens—let’s call it the Struggle Lens—is so crucial. It offers a visceral understanding of the human condition, which is the key to unlocking leadership potential and awakening the mind to an expanded menu of choices and possibilities. Let’s examine this Struggle Lens point by point.

- **Leadership . . .** The Struggle Lens begins with several different assumptions about leadership. While other leadership models implicitly draw a distinction between leaders and followers, this lens is egalitarian: *Everyone* who engages in the struggle to make important human values real and effective is practicing leadership. Similarly, while other leadership models focus only
on external behaviors, the Struggle Lens expands this view to also embrace the inner experience of the leader.

- **is a struggle**. Yes, leadership is a struggle, at least some of the time. It is vitally important to face this struggle head on—not hiding from it or feeling shame—because struggle is the gateway to learning and growth.

- **by flawed human beings**. All human beings have their own unique frailties. Some may argue that people should concentrate on developing their strengths and take no notice of their weaknesses. But conveniently ignoring blind spots, as noted in chapter 7, can lead to serious trouble. By acknowledging that you are imperfect, you give voice to a fundamental truth about what it is to be human, opening pathways for compassion, forgiveness, and healing.

- **to make some important human values real and effective**. Traditional leadership models emphasize the importance, and rightly so, of goal attainment. Yet an obsessive preoccupation with goals may blind a leader to circumstances in which goals and values, whether personal or organizational, are not in sync. This misalignment needs to be brought front and center so that explicit conversations can take place. What's more, not all important human values can be made real and effective in every situation, so choices must be made. What does that process look like?

- **in the world as it is**. Leadership occurs not in some ideal world but in the real world, filled with complexity, chaos, and uncertainty. Taking action always produces consequences that ripple out into the world at large. And no matter how creative the solution, there are always limits to an individual's power and influence; some factors are simply beyond one's control. Conviction must be tempered with pragmatism.

The Struggle Lens presents a new portrait of leadership, affirming that struggle has been central to humanity throughout the ages. A new narrative surfaces, emphasizing the realization of human potential through the crucible of adversity.

While traditional leadership narratives contemplate what and how, this struggle-centric narrative probes deeper, uncovering why. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the actualization of important human values is at the core of all human striving.

Indeed struggle and leadership are unquestionably intertwined. A new perspective dawns when struggle is recognized as an intrinsic aspect of leadership and an opportunity for leaders to realize their full potential. When struggle is viewed as an art to be mastered, a new set of strategies and practices emerges, enabling leaders to elevate their skills to ever-greater heights.

**The Art of Struggle: Mastery Practices**

Although the Struggle Lens was initially focused on fictional characters, its power can be fully leveraged by using it to probe real stories of actual leaders. To that end I asked numerous corporate, nonprofit, and government leaders to recall and describe a time of great struggle in their professional careers. Rather than predefine for them what struggle was, I allowed their unique narratives to guide my inquiry.

From 151 struggle examples covering a variety of challenging situations, a distinct pattern emerged. I saw that three fundamental conditions, or defining elements, were at the heart of every episode:

- **Change plays a prominent role in leadership struggle.**
- **This change creates a natural set of tensions.**
- **The tensions throw the leader off balance.**

Many of these real-world struggle stories turned out well. Some did not. Outcomes were influenced largely by how effectively leaders
channeling their energies to accept and embrace change and adaptively engage in the struggle. Even in the stories that ended badly, there was much learning to be gained; failures often proved to be catalysts for future growth.

How can leaders learn to adaptively and effectively channel their energies? My research reveals a set of core practices that form the backbone of this book, which is organized into three parts. Part I, which encompasses the first five chapters, focuses on becoming grounded—gaining a mooring on struggle and restoring balance. After a closer look at the defining elements of struggle (change, tensions, and being out of balance), the spotlight is trained on different scripts that commonly play out as struggle unfolds. You will also be introduced to the grounding practices:

- Adopt a growth mind-set.
- Become resilient in the face of failure.
- Draw your tension map.
- Center your mind, body, and spirit.
- Find the support you need.

After becoming grounded, leaders are ready to explore new pathways, the focus of the four chapters in part II. An extended discussion of the Struggle Lens provides context and texture as the exploring practices are examined:

- Reimagine the situation to discover a new creative path.
- Reinvent yourself.
- Overcome your blind spots.
- Heal yourself from conflict.
- Envision the common ground.

Part III is dedicated to deepening your adaptive energy so that you can fully realize your leadership potential. The deepening practices offered in these final two chapters validate that the leadership journey is a marathon. Yet the journey becomes more enjoyable and rewarding with every mile as you learn and apply the deepening practices:

- Write or revise your personal vision statement.
- Recommit, pivot, or leap.

Taking Center Stage: Leader Stories

A real-world exploration of leadership struggle requires real stories told by real leaders. You will meet people like Anne Mulcahy, Kathee Tesija, Ken Melrose, Joe Dowling, Dick Schulze, Marc Belton, Kate
Herzog, Joe Kelly, David Durenberger, and Mike Berman. All know what it’s like to be highly regarded leaders in careers as diverse as business, government, theater, and the military. All share their struggle narratives and, more importantly, their learning. In a few stories I have changed names and altered details—as indicated in the Notes—to protect the privacy of certain individuals. Some of these leaders stumbled badly before recovering admirably to blaze new trails or imagine innovative new solutions. Others discovered more-fulfilling career and life paths through their struggles. Other leaders who nose-dived and burned out emerged better and wiser for the experience.

I will also share my own stories, including some that illustrate the lessons I learned while working for and with Bill Gates. I hope and trust that you will actively engage with this narrative through the use of your own stories as well, beginning with the reflective exercises in chapter 3 as well as the additional resources on my website, www.snyderleadership.com. By relating to and connecting with these leadership stories, taking the mastery practices to heart, and working through the accompanying exercises, you will make the art of struggle come to life in ways both personal and profound.

Fully investing in this book by treating it as an interactive experience can only benefit your own leadership journey. The art of struggle is messy and imprecise. The path is littered with obstacles. You must summon the courage to confront your own story, to reconstruct your leadership narrative, and to forge ahead even in the midst of hardship. Out of your discomfort will flow a newfound ease, a self-assuredness that is at once both calming and energizing, and the rewarding blend of command and confidence that only mastery can bestow.

If you are ready, it is time to begin.
Struggle Is Not a Four-Letter Word

Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before—more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle.

— Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

Rita Marshall’s talents for crafting great public relations (PR) campaigns propelled her into a managerial position by the age of 30. Soon after arriving at her new company, she encountered her first leadership struggle.

Marshall was working as a PR professional in an advertising agency. The two disciplines—advertising and public relations—are very different, with dissimilar business models, nomenclatures, and rhythms for engaging with clients. Before she stepped into a formal leadership role, these differences, while minor annoyances, had not directly concerned her. With her new responsibilities, however, came new pressures. Now she had to find a way to make her company’s advertising-oriented policies relevant and meaningful to her PR team, all the while motivating them to achieve results. She found it especially challenging to be working with different players, customs, and rules.

During our interview Marshall told me: “I was tasked with being a leader to grow this division, and yet we had an Excel grid to track projects and progress and touch points that didn’t even match up to the types of projects and deliverables that we had on the other side of the business. Even the words were different. You want your team focused on the work and the deliverables for the client, and yet they were getting caught up in internal details for administering the business.”

Greatly outnumbered, and with an advertising-oriented boss who had a different view of public relations, Marshall started to feel disillusioned and alone. Her boss began to cast doubt on her leadership, which caused her to doubt herself: “There was a point where I just thought, Maybe I’m crazy. Maybe I don’t know what I’m doing. Maybe they shouldn’t put me out there in front of clients. I guess I just don’t have it. And that’s a very frustrating thing when you’re trying to lead, when you have self-doubts and your team is looking to you.”

Marshall’s self-doubts made matters worse. She found it difficult to lead with conviction and became frustrated with a culture that seemed to be blocking her progress. She had to do something. But what?

The Paradox of the Positive

Over the past several decades, the positive psychology movement has gained considerable momentum. It cascades into all areas of life—at work, with friends, in the community—subtly (and at times not so subtly), nudging a positive spin. All in all this is a good thing. Positive energy begets more positive energy. And numerous psychological studies show that when people feel optimistic and confident, they approach life with more vigor, have more-pleasant relationships, and are just plain happier.

Yet the full-throated emphasis on the positive comes at a price. The way that many organizational cultures internalize the principles of positive psychology actually undermines the very intentions of the movement. Indeed, positive psychology does not advocate ignoring the daunting life challenges that other branches of psychology attempt to treat; it is simply a call to pay as much attention to strengths as psychologists have historically given to weaknesses. This “be positive
at all costs” misinterpretation can trigger unintentional consequences as it seeps into the cultural bloodstream. For instance, tuning out all negative thoughts and emotions can be a roadblock to the honest conversations people need to have with themselves and with others.

The parallels between cultural attitudes toward positivity and the view of struggle are striking. Like anything other than perpetual cheerfulness, struggle is commonly seen as a sign of weakness, a notion reinforced through a labyrinth of implicit messages. Many leaders unconsciously categorize the word struggle as negative and off-putting, a taboo, which makes dealing with struggle even more difficult than it needs to be.

This can become especially problematic when leaders find themselves facing significant challenges. When external pressures for positive spin create dissonance with reality, leaders may ignore the incongruity they feel in their guts and stifle the candid conversations that could guide them forward. They may unconsciously compare themselves with others and allow this comparison to diminish their self-image and curb their potential. They may fall into the trap of thinking that leaders are supposed to be perfect—or at least perfectly capable of dealing with struggle. Consequently, they can feel embarrassed and stigmatized, thinking, *Something must be wrong with me. I'm not like all the other successful leaders out there.*

But of course no leader is perfect. All human beings have their own unique flaws and frailties. And of course struggle is a natural part of leadership. Dick Schulze, founder and former CEO of consumer electronics giant Best Buy, who built the company to more than $50 billion in sales with over 180,000 employees, said it best when he told me: “I don’t think that there has been a year in my 45 with the company that hasn't been beset with struggle.”

Schulze then added:

*With every episode of struggle, there is a learning opportunity.*

### Resolving the Paradox

The solution to the positivity paradox is relatively simple, but it demands a leap of faith. Instead of denying struggle, or feeling some degree of shame, savvy leaders embrace struggle as an opportunity for growth and learning, as an art to be mastered. They come to see struggle as a universal rite of passage without allowing themselves to become mired in it. They trust that engaging earnestly with struggle will ultimately take them to a better place, heightening their awareness of themselves and others and opening their minds to possibilities they may not have otherwise imagined.

Examples abound of prominent leaders who fail in a specific pursuit but who emerge stronger and more resilient from the experience. Had it not been for President John F. Kennedy’s failure in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, he might not have gained the wisdom needed to meet the greatest challenge of his presidency 18 months later: the Cuban Missile Crisis, which imperiled the very survival of the human race.

Clearly, struggle and leadership are intertwined. Teaming the courage to confront conflict with openness to new learning and the energy of positive thinking can turn struggle into transformation, paving the way for accelerated growth and development. The more that leaders move away from negative stereotypes and welcome a new relationship with struggle, the more they leave room for new possibilities to emerge. They begin asking better questions and recognizing the positive aspects of struggle. Shedding old assumptions, they free themselves to engage differently with the world around them, shaping their conversations to be more open and adaptive.

### Two Stories of Struggle

Allow me to introduce you to two remarkable leaders whose struggle stories are vastly different. One was thrust into a top leadership job during a time of crisis; the other strove to fulfill a vision so ambitious and far-reaching that it seemed beyond the scope of human achievement.
Anne Mulcahy

In 2008 Anne Mulcahy was named CEO of the Year by *Chief Executive* magazine for her work at Xerox Corporation. Eight years earlier few would have predicted it.

In 2000 Xerox was in turmoil. The board had abruptly fired G. Richard Thoman as CEO after a very brief tenure and brought back his predecessor, Paul Allaire, who personally recruited Mulcahy as president/chief operating officer (COO). By October, Mulcahy began to understand just how bad things were. Third-quarter earnings had missed analysts’ expectations, and the company was close to declaring bankruptcy. Mulcahy candidly remarked on an October investor conference call, “Xerox’s business model is unsustainable.” That simple comment sent the stock price nose-diving and set the stage for an extraordinary story of leadership growth and corporate transformation.

Shortly after that conference call, Mulcahy needed to make one of the most important decisions of her career: whether to seek bankruptcy protection or try to reverse the hemorrhaging of cash that was pushing the company close to insolvency. The company’s financial advisers strongly recommended the bankruptcy route, but Mulcahy had a different vision. She felt bankruptcy would tarnish the reputation of the venerable company she had come to dearly love over her five years of employment there.

Instead, Mulcahy set the company down a path of pruning expenses and selling off business units, all the while preserving core assets essential to the rebuilding efforts. One of the core assets she preserved was the company’s fledgling color-printing and copying business. In 2000 large-scale color printing was still in its infancy, but Mulcahy placed a big bet that the ensuing decade would see huge growth. She was right. By 2007, 40 percent of Xerox’s total revenue would come from color printing, and Xerox products would capture the highest market share.

Early in her tenure as president/COO, Mulcahy met personally with key customers and the company’s top 100 leaders, sharing her passion and enthusiasm and convincing them to remain loyal during this difficult time. She told her sales force: “I will go anywhere, anytime, to save a Xerox customer.”

Her mission was nothing short of “restoring Xerox to a great company once again.” But the path to get there would be dogged with adversity. “There were many near-death moments when we weren’t sure the company could get through the crisis,” she admitted.

Not only was the company’s survival at stake but the struggle cut to the very core of Mulcahy’s identity. “One day I had just flown back from Japan,” she said. “I came back to the office and found it had been a dismal day. At around 8:30 p.m. on my way home, I pulled over to the side of the Merritt Parkway and said to myself, I don’t know where to go. I don’t want to go home. There’s just no place to go.”

In the midst of her despair, Mulcahy checked her voice mail and found a supportive message from one of her colleagues telling her how much everyone believed in her and the company. “That was all I needed to just drive home, and get up again the next morning,” she said.

Mulcahy’s leadership growth is even more remarkable when you consider her background. She had come through the ranks in sales, spent time in human resources, and had just become the general manager of a small, out-of-the-way business unit when she was tapped for the role of president/COO.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Mulcahy’s background is that she had very little financial training. She had never held a financial management job and felt clearly over her head as she navigated the hostile financial waters of disappointing earnings, stock market declines, and angry analysts.

Mulcahy’s untimely remark during the October 3, 2000, investor conference call is a good example of her financial inexperience. Her
bold statement that Xerox’s business model was unsustainable may have been accurate, although there were undoubtedly more market-sensitive ways to communicate Xerox’s shaky financial status while still remaining authentic as a leader.

Fortunately, Mulcahy sought out capable mentors who helped her recover from that early misstep. In 2002, a year after being promoted to CEO, she personally renegotiated a $7 billion revolving line of credit, pulling together a consortium of 58 banks that needed to approve the deal. In the process she went toe to toe with Citigroup CEO Sandy Weill, successfully securing his commitment to personally reel in three holdout banks.

Mulcahy would summarize her experience as follows: “This was a job that would dramatically change my life, requiring every ounce of energy that I had. I never expected to be CEO, nor was I groomed for it.”

**Bill Gates**

In marked contrast to Anne Mulcahy, Bill Gates envisioned himself as a CEO at a very young age, and at every step in his career he took proactive measures to hone the skills he needed to actualize his vision.

I began working closely with Bill Gates in 1983, when I served as Microsoft’s liaison with IBM. At 28 I was just a year older than Bill. Microsoft, like the personal computer industry itself, was gaining traction. Still, with just $50 million in revenue and 250 employees, it was light years away from becoming the $74 billion behemoth it is today.

About two years into my tenure, Steve Ballmer, Bill Gates, and I were on an airplane flying back to Seattle from a successful meeting with IBM in Boca Raton. Bill and Steve were sitting together; I was a few rows forward with an empty seat next to me. In the middle of the flight, Bill came over to sit with me. After briefly talking about our development tools business, he asked me to become the general manager of the group.

I knew what a big deal that was to Bill. He was entrusting me with the company’s legacy. Microsoft got its start back in 1975 when Bill Gates and Paul Allen wrote the first BASIC Interpreter (one of the products in the development tools area) and licensed it to MITS on the first personal computer, the Altair.

By 1985 Microsoft’s product line had blossomed into a number of programming languages, including Assembler, BASIC, C, COBOL, Fortran, and Pascal. But its business had come under fire by an upstart called Borland International. Borland sold more than 500,000 units of Turbo Pascal and became the dominant player in that market, decimating our Pascal business. All of us knew that it was just a matter of time before Borland would launch an assault on our C product as well as on our flagship BASIC.

Putting me in charge of this group meant that Bill had crossed a psychological hurdle that he had wrestled with for a while. He knew that as our businesses evolved, it would be necessary to appoint general managers who could oversee all aspects of product strategy, marketing, and development. This new cadre of leaders would have the skills to formulate business strategy, assess market threats and opportunities, evaluate strategic alternatives, and focus resources on the most productive path.

But there was one problem. It would mean violating what Bill held as almost a sacred principle of leadership. Bill’s name for this violation was the “inverted hierarchy,” a situation in which a technical manager reports to a boss who is less technically qualified. Its very name implies that something is topsy-turvy.

Bill’s reason for respecting the sanctity of the technical hierarchy stemmed from his core belief that the best way to motivate software engineers was to have them supervised by people who were more technically qualified, whom they would learn from and respect. This model had worked extremely well for Microsoft in the decade since its inception.
Bill had begun to rethink this approach a year earlier, when he created two divisions—the Applications Division and the Systems Division—each core to Microsoft’s business at the time. He put his trusted college friend Steve Ballmer in charge of the Systems Division, while Bill led the Applications Division himself. Creating a business unit for our development tools business meant pushing the inverted hierarchy down one more level. While Bill knew of the risks involved, he could also see the competitive landscape unfolding with Borland. If he did not act, Borland would wreak havoc when it invaded Microsoft’s turf of C and BASIC.

When I look back, I now understand the intuitive leap of faith that Bill took to make this move. Technical excellence was at the core of Microsoft’s competitive strategy, and its software engineers were Microsoft’s crown jewel. Now Bill would need to give up a key aspect of his leadership model that had driven the company’s success for its first decade.

I would observe numerous other examples of Bill’s growth as a leader as we continued to work together over the next several years. One such example came as we were preparing the launch plans for our new BASIC and C products in 1987, launches that would leapfrog Borland with potentially game-changing innovations.

Part of our plan was to tap into the energy of computer user groups, whose members were key influencers in the fledgling market for development tools. Knowing how much excitement Steve Jobs generated when he unveiled the Macintosh in 1984 at the Boston Computer Society, I envisioned Bill as our keynote speaker. I figured we could easily draw 1,500 people at a launch event, quickly building momentum.

We were well into our launch planning, and I noticed that Bill had not yet agreed to speak. His reluctance was puzzling to me. I wondered, What are his concerns? What could possibly be holding him back? To me this was such an obvious strategy. Bill was a brilliant speaker. He had a unique way of combining clarity of message, eloquence of delivery, and passion, with a nice dollop of humor.

Bill and I would meet informally for brainstorming sessions from time to time, so at one meeting I finally asked him about it. His concerns seemed to center around Q&A: What if someone asked a question to which he didn’t know the answer?

I tried to encourage him. I told him that he was a very effective speaker, and I could not imagine a single question he could not answer. Also, our lead technical guru would be sitting in the front row in case there was a need for further elaboration.

I guess that small measure of reassurance was enough. Bill agreed to speak, and we introduced our new C product at the Boston Computer Society in front of more than 1,700 people. Of course Bill gave a magnificent speech. The Q&A went well, too. On one question, Bill looked tentatively in our direction, as if to check himself, but he had already given a solid answer and there was no need to say anything more. The launch was a huge success, as was the launch of our new BASIC when Bill spoke to the Philadelphia user group several weeks later. Microsoft would go on to defeat Borland and regain its dominance in the market.

I would never again talk to Bill about the concerns he expressed that day. There was no need; he had successfully crossed the threshold. But now, thinking about the episode many years later, I remember how many steps Bill took to come up to speed on our products before the launch. By the multitude of questions he had fired off via e-mail, it was clear that he had thoroughly pored over all the technical material he had requested. By the time he spoke, he had taken the time to fully prepare himself to answer almost anything.

**Three Defining Elements of Leadership Struggle**

Struggle occurs when a difficult or complex situation arises that presents some challenge or adversity. The details can vary considerably—from
beginning a new job or confronting a major disappointment to facing a difficult decision or managing an unexpected external event—but in all examples there are three fundamental conditions that determine the nature of the struggle and serve as its defining elements: change, tensions, and being out of balance.

### Defining Elements of Struggle

**Change**

Change stands at the heart of leadership struggle. Every struggle is triggered by some type of change. Perhaps a leader initiates that change by envisioning a new direction for the organization; struggle may emerge from forces that stand in opposition to that vision. In other cases change may be imposed on a leader by a new set of enterprise-related circumstances caused by loss of key personnel, financial constraints, competitive pressures, or some other setback. Large-scale changes such as economic recession or cultural upheaval may produce more-serious, long-term consequences.

External change, whether desired or not, always carries with it seeds of opportunity and growth. The struggle may come from discerning the best way to take advantage of those opportunities or how to do so with limited resources.

Even when change is welcome, struggle is often a natural by-product. A move to a new job or company can be exciting, yet it requires a step outside the comfort zone into a puzzling new world that has yet to be comprehended much less mastered.

In still other cases, change comes from deep within a leader’s inner world. As the heart and the mind expand to take in new ideas, feelings, and perspectives, struggle comes from the process of clarifying newly emerging values and identity.

In Anne Mulcahy’s story, change is the central theme on multiple fronts. Xerox needed to dramatically alter its course; otherwise it would spin into bankruptcy. The industry was also changing, opening a door of opportunity to capitalize on the emergence of large-scale commercial color printing. Finally, Mulcahy herself needed to change and grow as a leader to rise to the challenge.

The Bill Gates stories I’ve shared can also be understood in the context of his audacious vision of change. When he founded Microsoft in 1975 at age 19, he boldly envisioned that there would be a computer on every desk and in every home and that every computer would run Microsoft software. During my five years at Microsoft, his energies centered on actualizing this dream. At a company meeting in late 1987, Bill announced that we were about halfway there. Hearing this I made a mental note that the year 2000 would carry some significance. As it turned out, that was the year that Bill elevated Steve Ballmer to be the second CEO of Microsoft, freeing Bill to eventually embark on his new journey as full-time philanthropist. In this new role, Bill would turn his attention to bringing about a new wave of societal changes and innovations, ranging from education and health care to energy and global development.

### Tensions

The process of change creates a natural set of tensions, the second defining element of leadership struggle. Chapter 4 offers a detailed look at the four tension points that grow out of struggle. These tension points stem from individual and institutional traditions (past)
and aspirations (future) as well as (outward) relationships and (inward) identity.

**Being out of Balance**

The third element of leadership struggle is that change and its ensuing tensions throw a leader off balance. Sometimes the imbalance is felt in subtle ways: a quiet voice, a nagging concern in the leader’s gut, or reluctance or procrastination of an important task. Sometimes the fears are deeper, the emotions more powerful. A leader may lose confidence and feel the weight of the world on his or her shoulders. Some individuals remain cool and collected at work and unleash all their frustration on their families when they get home. Still others may vent their stress in self-defeating behaviors like gambling or drinking, all the while denying that a problem exists.

One female leader shared a harrowing experience while working as a brand manager at a major consumer products company: “It was so stressful. My hair started falling out. I didn’t realize it was stress. All I knew was I could see my scalp in the mirror when I brushed my teeth. It was hard. It was really hard. It was joyless.”

Other leaders had these recollections:

- “It was incredibly difficult. If I had to name the emotions, I would say anger, hurt, and betrayal were right on top.”
- “Fear. I had fear. I had anger. I think I went through everything. I had sadness.”
- “Frustration. You don’t feel like your voice is being heard anymore. And I had a very influential voice before.”
- “There were periods when I would be sleep deprived. And it’s really hard to deal with pressure when you are sleep deprived.”
- “I didn’t have peace. When your job is extra stressful, you are always thinking about it. Your mind is preoccupied. You start to focus on that, and you keep thinking about it: How can I make it better? How can I fix it? How can I change? Is there a way out? Are there any other possibilities? You start questioning and asking all these questions. If it’s giving you so much stress that it’s affecting the rest of your life, it’s not good. That’s what I call not having peace.”

An important note: A leader may be out of balance without actually being aware that he or she is out of balance. Very often family members, friends, life partners, and colleagues are more keenly aware of the imbalance than is the one going through the struggle. Other people’s willingness and courage to confront someone they care about, and that person’s willingness to listen, can be major steps in resolving the struggle. A leader’s acknowledgment and awareness of being out of balance is central to regaining balance and becoming centered again.

**Playing Out Struggle: Scripts**

Leaders respond to the change, tension, and intense emotions of their struggles in different ways. I have identified six scripts that describe different progressions in a struggle episode. By understanding these scripts, leaders gain the agility to shift course midstream or even to proactively select a script in advance, circumventing problems that might otherwise have surfaced. Here is a brief introduction to each of the scripts, which we explore in more detail in upcoming stories.

**Script #1: Proactive Reinvention**

In the proactive-reinvention script, leaders recognize that strategies that may have worked in the past are no longer effective. Reinvention—the willingness to start anew with a fresh perspective—is required in order to forge new strategies that are more adaptive to the current circumstances. For example, Bill Gates reinvented a crucial aspect of his leadership model when he accepted the need for
an “inverted hierarchy.” He also proactively took steps to overcome his fears, agreeing to assume the important role of product spokesperson at user group events during Microsoft’s battle for market share with Borland.

Script #2: Stumble, Recover, and Learn

After making mistakes due to inexperience, leaders who follow the stumble/recover/learn script recognize those errors and take appropriate corrective action. They also strive to repair any relationships that were damaged along the way and vow never again to repeat the pattern. This was Anne Mulcahy’s script, which began when she declared Xerox’s business model unsustainable on an investor conference call in October 2000.

Script #3: Burnout

Passionate leaders with bold ideas may enthusiastically charge ahead in new situations, all fired up to do whatever it takes to realize their vision. But as the burnout script progresses, they encounter stakeholders who do not share their enthusiasm or their vision. These hard-charging leaders are often so convinced that their vision is superior that they fail to take the time to fully understand and appreciate anyone else’s point of view. Consequently, when their colleagues have very different ideas, the stage is set for conflict. All too often relationships are soured and enemies are made. Yet instead of stepping back to consider their role in the conflict, such leaders tend to blame others, whom they clearly see as wrong. Inevitably, their past actions restrict their future options, and they find themselves trapped in situations in which they have little control. They not only feel drained of physical and emotional energy but fail to realize how their attitude and behavior drain the energy of others as well. Ultimately, they either leave in exhaustion or are fired. This script played out for Steve Jobs during his first tenure at Apple.

Script #4: Transcending Constraint

In the transcending-constraint script, leaders initially see tremendous obstacles ahead but feel incapable of surmounting them due to external constraints. As their adaptive energy kicks in, however, they begin reimagining the situation, revealing strategies and options that had previously escaped their awareness. This is how Rita Marshall’s script plays out in the next section.

Script #5: Mission Impossible

At first the mission-impossible script feels similar to the transcending-constraint script. The difference is, no matter how creative and dedicated these leaders may be, every road toward resolution comes to a dead end. Ultimately, they are forced to accept that there is no way to realize their vision and aspirations. The constraints are simply insurmountable. If leaving is not an option, they are reduced to hunkering down while trying to maintain some degree of balance.

Script #6: Confronting Failure

In the confronting-failure script, leaders are forced to acknowledge that things did not work out according to their plans and expectations. In a word, they have failed. The struggle is finding ways to remain resilient as they pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and move on while still learning from the experience. This was the Steve Jobs script after he lost the power struggle at Apple in 1985.

A Lifelong Journey

Rita Marshall, who attempted to lead the PR function in an advertising agency, most closely follows the transcending-constraint script. Marshall relied on her natural optimism to quickly help her regain her balance. She found the inner strength to search for a creative solution, tapping into the very tensions that were causing her distress. She was concerned about how she could lead with conviction
and authenticity when people seemed to doubt she had the expertise to do the job. So she took action to increase her credibility by pursuing professional accreditation in public relations. Achieving this accreditation was a “big deal” to Marshall; it boosted her confidence and provided external validation of her PR expertise to her doubting boss.

Furthermore, Marshall’s sense of isolation was a stressor. While she felt a professional kinship with the people working for her, it was inappropriate and counterproductive to confide in them. She felt her boss was unable to provide her with the support she needed, so Marshall proactively created an external support system. First she tapped into her family, but soon she found camaraderie at PR professional associations and peer women’s support groups. Ultimately, she found a mentor who had the experience and the wisdom she was seeking. These actions gave Marshall the confidence she needed to improve her effectiveness and transcend the constraints she may have initially felt were insurmountable. Over time she learned to appreciate the differences between advertising and public relations and saw how they could work together rather than in opposition.

Marshall and I spoke again about a year after our initial interview. After working for a long time within an advertising culture, she had decided to build on her knowledge and experience by starting her own PR firm. This did not surprise me. Now in her forties, Marshall had reached what author Gail Sheehy has called “the age of mastery,” a time when people’s professional skills solidify and they feel a sense of confidence in what they can contribute to the world.

But there was also a twist in Marshall’s story. For months she had been watching her 19-year-old son slide deeper into drug addiction. She and her family were entering a new chapter in their lives as they learned to cope with this difficult challenge. Marshall shared with me an essay she wrote that was published in a local newspaper:

Our son’s addiction called into consideration my beliefs and values. It had been a long time since faith and spirituality played a significant role in my life, but if ever there was a good time to reconnect, this was it.

Some things remain a struggle, but I embrace the journey for what it is and choose my actions and perspective. There have been some incredibly bright spots, including meeting people whom I genuinely admire but might never have met, developing more meaningful relationships with friends and family, reconnecting with a higher power, and engaging some of my gifts, including advocacy and writing.

One of the most remarkable findings from my research was how people’s perceptions of struggle evolve over time. Leaders I interviewed often recalled stories that had occurred two, three, or even four decades earlier. As these leaders reflected on the impact that their struggles had on their lives, they acknowledged that the passage of time had given them a broader perspective.

Remember the brand manager who was so stressed that her hair was falling out? She got through her ordeal and eventually became the CEO of a different company. Here is how she reflected on the totality of her experiences: “From my perspective, every single bump in the road, slap in the face, knee in the back—every single one of those things was a fabulous gift. You get through it, and you stop and say, ‘That hurt like hell, what was that?’ And you say, ‘Oh, my gosh, I am in this bright, sunny place as a result.’ There isn’t a single one of those things that I don’t reflect on as a gift of some form.”

In the midst of a major crisis, it may be hard to think of such difficult challenges as gifts. But with the healing that comes with time, it is natural for people to alter their perceptions. This process becomes self-reinforcing. The more we think of bumps, slaps, and knees in the back as gifts, or at least as opportunities for growth and learning, the more capably we can handle whatever life sends our way.

In the words of Rita Marshall, “I don’t think any of us wakes up in the morning and says, ‘I hope I have a struggle today.’” Still there
are times when struggle is inevitable. At these times leaders need to recognize what is unfolding around them, adapt their energy accordingly, and make informed, well-reasoned choices. Indeed adaptive energy is a vital and necessary force that leaders need to harness if they are to realize their aspirations. This becomes clearer in the next chapter through the leadership examples of Kate Herzog, Bill Gates, and Steve Jobs.