

The Crucibles of Leadership

“Experience is not what happens to a man. It is what a man does with what happens to him.” ~ Aldous Huxley

The ability to extract wisdom from challenging experiences distinguishes successful leaders from their broken or burned-out peers.

Difficult and, in some cases, career- or life-threatening events are called *leadership crucibles*. They are trials and tests — points of deep self-reflection that force you to question who you are and what really matters. Characterized by a confluence of threatening intellectual, social, economic and/or political forces, crucibles test your patience, belief systems and core values.

When you’re open to learning from mistakes, problems and failures, you become a stronger leader. You gain followers’ trust, and they’re eager to produce their best work.

Transparent, honest leaders enjoy multiple benefits: learning, creativity, engagement, flexibility and effective communications. Those who take ownership of their role in organizational problems can decode the contexts in which they make choices and how to avoid repeating poor decisions.

After interviewing more than 200 top business and public-sector leaders, authors Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas were surprised to find that all of them — young and old — could point to intense, often traumatic, always unplanned experiences that transformed their distinctive leadership abilities.

Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Al Gore and Barack Obama have all been willing to talk about their contributions to national failures. As leaders, they thrived because they learned from their mistakes, which inspired confidence, loyalty and commitment even in adverse times.

Leadership crucibles require us to examine our values, question our assumptions and hone our judgment. We can emerge stronger and surer of ourselves and our purpose, changed in some fundamental way.

One of the most reliable predictors of effective leadership is your ability to find meaning in negative events, learn from trying circumstances, and inspire others through a tenacious hold on life and learning. As Bennis and Joan Goldsmith state in [*Learning to Lead: A Workbook on Becoming a Leader*](#) (Basic Books, 2010):

“Conquering adversity — and emerging stronger than ever — makes for extraordinary leaders.”

In Search of Leadership Gold

To a scientist, a crucible is a vessel in which substances are heated to high temperatures to trigger a chemical transformation (for example, a steel refinery's blast furnace).

In the leadership context, think of a crucible as a transformative experience from which you can extract your "gold": a new or altered sense of identity.

As Bennis notes:

"Just like the alchemists in history used crucibles in the hopes of turning other elements into gold, great leaders emerge in their own lives as a result of how they deal with their crucibles."

Most of us find ourselves in a difficult situation at some point in our lives. We may be undertaking new tasks, confronting new challenges, or working at a new pace or with new degrees of responsibility. In each of these cases, there are heightened stakes for success or failure.

Such experiences are extremely stressful and may cause us to challenge our underlying assumptions about who we are and what we stand for. A crucible helps you redefine your values or recognize major themes that reoccur in your life.

Adaptive Capacity

Why can some people extract wisdom from even the harshest experiences while others continue to flail?

Perhaps Charles Darwin put it best:

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

Crucibles set the stage for adaptation. We are forced to develop new competencies that prepare us for future challenges.

Some people are simply more adaptive than others. In many ways, our capacity to change hinges on our ability to think creatively — to look at a problem and spot unconventional solutions.

Adaptive leaders can entertain opposing views. They learn to thrive in the face of uncertainty and negativity. They can tolerate ambiguity and consider multiple options, without defaulting to short-term thinking or premature decision-making.

Buried Treasures

It's inherently difficult for us to reflect on painful moments, so their lessons may be buried or forgotten on a conscious level. But pain forms memories that subconsciously affect our current behaviors.

Viewed in retrospect, a crucible may become a defining moment in your life, even if you cannot recognize it as it's happening. Ultimately, it's an opportunity to question your most basic assumptions and values, and determine how you want to show up in the world.

Conflicts, challenges and early-life difficulties all contribute to crucible moments. For many of us, a crucible may not initially appear to be a loss or hardship. But as you reflect on it, you'll discover the many ways in which events influence your unconscious behaviors. Some underlying memories are carried into adulthood, undermining your coping skills until you acknowledge and understand their impact on your life.

From Principles to Practice

Business experts once believed we could master leadership skills by reading books and taking classes. It slowly dawned on them that we practice leadership on the job.

Acquiring leadership skills requires implementation. As with any other performance art, deliberate practice is necessary. We learn to be effective leaders by interacting with other people and groups.

Some experts call this the "apprenticeship model," and "academy companies" like GE, PepsiCo and P&G have taken to it to heart, making developmental assignments a core part of their leadership-development programs.

Thomas offers additional insights in [*Crucibles of Leadership: How to Learn from Experience to Become a Great Leader*](#) (Harvard Business Review Press, 2008):

1. Practice can trump talent.
2. Outstanding leaders devise a strategy for transforming crucibles into learning.
3. Organizations can grow leaders faster by helping them learn from experience.

Making difficult choices that lead to growth gives us a more generous self-perception. We, in turn, survive crucibles with greater confidence and tolerance for taking risks.

Discover Your Crucibles

It's almost impossible to take stock of yourself without guidance from a trusted friend, mentor or coach. To be truly self-aware, you need someone to hold a mirror so you can observe past and present behaviors. You also need healthy doses of courage, honesty and willingness to listen to feedback.

Begin the discovery process with writing exercises, which you'll share and discuss with your coach or mentor. Determine whether difficult childhood experiences are triggering strong emotional reactions in the present.

Learn to regard crucibles as integral to midcareer growth. You can work with your coach or mentor to reframe experiences as valuable life lessons. Old patterns and "tapes" can be replaced with new strategies for handling adversity.

In [*Finding Your True North: A Personal Guide*](#) (Jossey-Bass, 2009), Bill George, Andrew McLean and Nick Craig suggest writing a letter to yourself to describe key crucibles in your life. Present these experiences in one continuous draft, taking as much time and space as you need to complete the letter. Tell the *whole* story: context, high point, what changed, the emotions you felt, and the consequences and aftereffects.

Answer the following questions as you write:

- What was the greatest crucible of my life?
- Why was this experience so challenging for me? (List all reasons.)
- What was the most stressful, challenging or hard-to-endure point in my story?
- How did I resolve the crucible experience at the time?
- In retrospect, how would I reframe it today?
- What resources did I have at the time, compared to those I have now?
- Which emotional scars must be healed for me to become a better leader?
- What fundamental insights did my crucible teach me?

Leaders often begin their careers with a strong drive to achieve and succeed. They focus on themselves, their performance and the results they want to achieve. As they mature and rise to higher responsibilities, there must be a shift from "I" to "we." Great leaders become teachers, role models and mentors, using their influence to groom others. They are ultimately rewarded with the gifts of authenticity, compassion and humility.

As you gain greater self-awareness from your writing exercises, add the following questions to the assignment:

- How have my crucible experiences enabled me to discover my passion for making a difference in the world?
- How do my crucibles affect my view of my leadership abilities?
- Can I pinpoint examples of leading from an “I” vs. “we” perspective?
- How much time do I spend focusing on others vs. myself?

Be sure to review the answers with your coach or mentor.

Sustaining Success

As hard as it may be to review unpleasant events from your past, the benefits certainly outweigh the discomfort you’ll initially feel.

- You’ll gain greater awareness of your values and beliefs.
- Your crucibles shape your passion to lead.
- Understanding your crucibles helps you move from an “I” to a “we” orientation — a critical development for leadership integrity.
- Going through crucibles enhances your capacity for empathy and compassion.
- Crucibles can be used to learn about who you are, as well as about how you learn and grow.
- Your leadership lessons are invaluable for teaching and grooming others.

As you face future crucibles, ask yourself:

How can I draw from my strengths and knowledge reservoir to sustain myself and overcome these difficulties?

Your answers to this question will shape your leadership effectiveness.