

Praise For

THE EIGHT PARADOXES OF GREAT LEADERSHIP

“The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership is an insightful and practical guide for leaders who want to grow their impact and influence, and do so in an authentic and effective way. Tim Elmore’s perspective on leadership is grounded in both his own experience from building a dynamic organization and closely observing a number of other outstanding leaders. I highly recommend this book.”

—Tim Tassopoulos,
President and COO, Chick Fil A

“We’re not experiencing an era of change, but a change of era.’ This is one of many powerful statements in this book about leading in a complex age. As you digest this content, your leadership will soar to a new level. God knows we need leaders who are courageous and willing to practice the paradoxes that make them uncommon.”

—Anne Beiler,
Founder of Auntie Anne Pretzels, Author, Speaker

“Leadership is really, at its core, a paradox—or a set of paradoxes. Tim Elmore captures eight of these paradoxes in an engaging, entertaining, and enlightening read that is sure to both encourage and challenge you and your team. As our world begins the difficult task of emerging from a global pandemic, we are in urgent need of the great leadership that Tim describes here.”

—Dave Katz,
President of Coca Cola Bottling Company Consolidated

“Who would have thought that leadership today requires that we balance apparent contradiction? But that’s exactly what Tim Elmore suggests in this insightful book. If you apply the paradoxes in this book, it will transform your leadership.”

—Gene Smith,
Director of Athletics, Vice President, Ohio State University

“So much has been written about leadership today, but often it simply fails to describe the confusing complexity of what it *really* takes to lead in ways that uplift others, transform outdated approaches, and guide individuals and entities to thrive. Addressing what’s needed most—particularly all the paradoxes involved in becoming a truly great leader—Tim Elmore’s book examines brand new ground, helping us balance the seemingly contradictory traits leaders need to embody. Tim’s decades of hands-on experience growing leaders—from young adults to highly accomplished C-suite executives—gives him a powerful lens for teaching us how to balance confidence and humility, visibility and invisibility, personal interrelationships with collective connection, teaching while being the student, and finally, timeless integrity with immediacy and relevance. If you want to be a leader who leaves a positive legacy, don’t miss this book.”

—Kathy Caprino,
Forbes Journalist, Author and Life Coach

“Humility and confidence. Vision and blind spots. High standards and gracious forgiveness. Effective leaders stand out because they are able to juggle seemingly contradictory traits like these to lead their teams well. Tim Elmore tells us how. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to become a leader worth following.”

—Andy Stanley,
Author, Communicator, Founder, North Point Ministries

“Today’s workplace is different than it was in the past. Team members are more educated and expect more of leaders than they did when I started my career. The eight paradoxes in this book address these complexities and offer doable solutions for leaders today. This book is practical, insightful, and fun to read.”

—Hector Padilla,
Executive Vice President of Outside Sales & Service, Home Depot

“The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership is a must-read for all leaders—whether they are beginning their careers or already leading organizations. At a time when employees yearn for leadership that embodies social and emotional intelligence, this book will help you think differently about what it means to be an impactful leader in today’s workplace.”

—Camye Mackey,
Chief People Officer, Diversity and Inclusion, Atlanta Hawks

“If you appreciate nuance, Tim Elmore in this book unpacks superb examples of brilliant paradoxical leadership and then leads you to clear applications. If you don’t yet appreciate nuance, I recommend you start—start right here with *The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership*.”

—Bob Taylor,
Founder and President, Taylor Guitars

“This book unlocks the secrets that make effective leaders so successful. It explains how they balance traits that seem paradoxical, yet others want to follow them. This is a must-read for any leader who wants to flourish in today’s complex marketplace.”

—John C. Maxwell,
Bestselling Author, Founder of John Maxwell Company

“Over the years, our managers and coaches have noticed a change in our players. These changes require better leadership from all of us who call ourselves leaders. For quite a while, we’ve benefited from Tim Elmore and his insights into leading the next generation. These eight paradoxes are prime examples of what we need to do in order to succeed. I recommend this book highly.”

—Dayton Moore,
General Manager, Kansas City Royals

INTRODUCING THE JOHN MAXWELL IMPRINT



The John Maxwell Imprint is a new leadership-focused division of HarperCollins Publishing that seeks to extend and expand the legacy of leadership expert Dr. John C. Maxwell. Dr. Maxwell has been identified as the #1 leader in business by the American Management Association® and the most influential leadership expert in the world by *Business Insider* and *Inc.* magazine. A recipient of the Horatio Alger Award, as well as the Mother Teresa Prize for Global Peace and Leadership from the Luminary Leadership Network, Dr. Maxwell speaks each year to Fortune 500 companies, presidents of nations, and many of the world's top business leaders.

The mission of the John Maxwell imprint is to discover and publish books that identify with John Maxwell's personal values and philosophy of leadership. The authors will be men and women of integrity in their personal, business, and spiritual lives, who have demonstrated a desire to add value to leaders who multiply that value to people, whether through their teaching, writing, or business acumen.

The
— EIGHT —
PARADOXES
— | of | —
GREAT
LEADERSHIP

*Embracing the Conflicting Demands
of Today's Workplace*

T I M E L M O R E



HARPERCOLLINS
LEADERSHIP

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FOREWORD BY JOHN C. MAXWELL

Legend has it that an ancient Chinese curse went like this: “May you live in interesting times.”

It was a curse because life always feels easier in boring, predictable times. A similar Chinese expression goes, “Better to be a dog in times of tranquility than a human in times of chaos.”

I think it’s safe to say that we live in interesting times. Even chaotic times.

And that is the reason for this book. *The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership* is about the complexities of leading in interesting, even outlandish times, when those of us who supervise teams enjoy very little certainty. In 2020, the year COVID-19 broke out, more than one leader told me, “I feel like I made a year’s worth of decisions in a month.”

The word that leaders began using daily was *pivot*. Organizations had to adapt to the new normal. Retailers had to pivot because all of our shopping for a while was online. Zoom had to pivot because suddenly the whole world was meeting virtually. Life became both easier and harder at once. We learned we could do life differently, and likely we will never return completely to the way we lived prior to 2020.

While I have taught *timeless principles* of leadership and teamwork for more than thirty years, I believe there are *timely paradoxes* that are also needed in our day. In fact, especially in our day. This

book examines eight of these paradoxes that effective leaders practice when facing volatile and uncertain seasons.

To illustrate how essential these paradoxes are, let me ask you some questions.

Have you ever observed a leader who was overconfident and wished they embodied a little more humility? Or vice versa, have you witnessed a very humble leader who couldn't motivate people to do anything and wished they had a little more confidence? Bingo. What was needed was a paradox: people need both confidence and humility from their leader.

Have you ever watched a leader who did too much, never empowering others to step up and take their place on a team? I bet you wished they would've stepped aside and become invisible so that others could realize their potential. On the other hand, do you know leaders who are never around, who never set an example, and wish they would model what they want their team to do? Once again, those leaders needed to practice a paradox: people need a leader to be both visible and invisible.

You get the idea.

There are apparent contradictory traits that great leaders display and by doing so attract the best people around them. I believe many leaders haven't spotted these paradoxes because they feel like oxymorons. Surely, they can't both exist, can they? Yet they must. Today's teams are made up of people with high expectations of their leaders, and managing teams is far more complex than it was when I began my career in 1969. One moment your people need you to be personal with them, and the next they need you to speak collectively, to the entire organization. One minute, they need you to set high standards for them to meet; the next, they need you to model gracious forgiveness when they fail. One minute they need you to be present; the next, they need you to get out of the way.

- ▼ You'll feel like an empathetic counselor and a motivational coach.

- ▼ You'll feel like a cheerleader and a chaplain.
- ▼ You'll feel like a model (who sets the example) and a magician (who disappears).

I spoke to Tim Elmore as he was writing this book and immediately got excited about it. I think he put his finger on a missing piece in so many leaders' careers. I told Tim I wanted this book to be a part of the John Maxwell Publishing line of books at HarperCollins Leadership. It aligns with the principles I have taught and complements them well. I have known Tim for forty years. We met when he was still in college and very green. But I saw something in him that I wanted to cultivate, so I invited him to join my team as soon as he graduated. We served together for twenty years, and I watched him grow and improve as a leader each year.

This book is an outcome of his leadership and his observations on leadership. It will challenge you to grow your social and emotional intelligence. It will stretch you to be multidimensional. It will provide you with practical action steps to embody these paradoxes.

Since we live in interesting times, we might as well enjoy the journey.



Paradoxical Leadership in a Complex Age

reminded myself of the story about Isaac Newton several times as I sat in quarantine last year. At twenty-two years old, young Isaac was sent home from Cambridge University during the Great Plague of London in 1665. It was their own version of “social distancing.”

And that’s when the magic happened.

Without his teachers to guide him, Newton flourished. The period he spent away was later referred to as his *annus mirabilis*, the “year of wonders.”

First, he continued working on math problems that he’d begun at Cambridge University. Believe it or not, the papers he wrote became the genesis of calculus.

Second, he acquired some prisms and began experimenting with them in his room, even boring a hole in his shutters so only a small beam of light could shine through. From his explorations emerged his theories on optics.

Third, outside his window was an apple tree. Yes, the apple tree we've all heard about. While parts of the narrative are legend, his assistant confirmed much of it is true. While Newton sat under that tree, an apple fell, which launched his thinking. From this apple, Newton developed his theory of the law of gravity and the laws of motion.

Back in London, a fourth of the population would die of the plague during 1665–1666. It was one of many outbreaks during the four hundred years that the Black Death pandemic ravaged Europe.

But today, we've all benefited from that outbreak.

Isn't it amazing that during a *great interruption*, Newton transformed it into a *great introduction* to an entirely new world of math and science? It was when he left a magnificent institution of higher education that he learned more than he could have in class. It was when life was on hold that he made his best progress. Our world was morphed by his time alone during a pandemic.

What an irony.

What a paradox.

Today, we live in the shadow of another pandemic. Our world was already complicated before, but the aftershocks of COVID-19 have only increased the challenges. Over the first twenty years of this century, our world became on-demand and instant access, driven by a gig economy, with a 24/7 news cycle on broadcast and social media. The most accurate description for our times comes from the US Army War College. It is the acronym, VUCA:

- ▼ Volatile
- ▼ Uncertain
- ▼ Complex
- ▼ Ambiguous

Pope Francis put it this way: “We’re not experiencing an era of change, but a change of era.”

These volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous times have led to many difficult challenges.

LEADING WHEN YOU'D RATHER BE LEAVING

Two decades into the twenty-first century, thousands of leaders left their jobs, decisions made by them or their boards. Consider this. More than one thousand CEOs stepped down during the first three quarters of 2019, according to a report by the staffing firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.¹

Departures in the first nine months of 2019 exceeded the number of CEOs who stepped down during the first three quarters of 2008, which was the height of the Great Recession. It was the highest CEO turnover in that time frame, since the firm began tracking departures in 2002.²

By late 2019, more CEOs of major brands had stepped down, including eBay, Nissan, WeWork, and JUUL. The complexities of leading major corporations, pleasing stakeholders, and negotiating disputes with board members simply became too much for these executives. Furthermore, consider this. While Americans were distracted by the coronavirus pandemic, many CEOs stepped down in the first quarter of 2020.

- ▼ The CEO of Disney stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of Hulu stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of IBM stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of LinkedIn stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of Uber Eats stepped down.
- ▼ The co-CEO of Salesforce and Vlocity stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of MGM stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of Lockheed Martin stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of Nestlé stepped down.

- ▼ The CEO of Volkswagen stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of Mastercard stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of T Mobile stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of Harley-Davidson stepped down.
- ▼ The CEO of Victoria Secret and Bed, Bath, and Beyond stepped down.

Fortune magazine called it “The Great CEO Exodus of 2020.”³ Not all of these exits were sparked by COVID-19, but the weight of leading in such times is causing many leaders to wonder if it’s worth it to stay. Whatever the patterns or conspiracy theories people find, one thing is sure: leading today is different than it was when I began my career. Our culture is anxious, and the marketplace is plagued by:

- ▼ A rapid rate of change, even fundamental change.
- ▼ Complicated circumstances with multiple stakeholders.
- ▼ An ever-critical public eye that spots and posts every flaw.
- ▼ A virus that becomes a pandemic and shuts everything down.
- ▼ A more educated team member who feels empowered by data.
- ▼ Convoluted and nuanced interactions that are scrutinized constantly.
- ▼ A fear of failing and an anxiety about the judgments of others around us.

Too often, organizations settle for leaders who do nothing, ensuring that at least they do nothing wrong. They choose *absenteeism* over *adversarial relationships*.

Consider a story I recently read about the dean of a reputable law school. “Two senior, well-regarded faculty members called

the provost to complain about their dean because, they said, *he wouldn't do anything*. The provost responded by saying that he had a dean who was a drunk, a dean who was accused of sexual harassment, and a dean who was accused of misusing funds, but the law school dean never caused him any problems. So, the provost said, the faculty members would just have to deal with their dean.”⁴

Do you see the logic behind the provost's argument? While a passive, even incompetent leader in the law school was suboptimal, he was the lesser of two evils. It was certainly better than active misconduct seen in the other college deans.

As far as I'm concerned, we play defense too often. And for that matter, we fail to play offense often enough. We tell ourselves that ours is a complicated day to be living in and become satisfied with avoiding losses. Or we settle for some form of leadership style or protocol that worked in the past. After all, what more could we expect? The top three candidates running for US president in 2020 were white males over seventy years old—Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, and Donald Trump. Younger, more vibrant candidates either dropped out due to un-electability or were overwhelmed before the race began. Frequently, this is a picture of our world today.

I wonder how many times we have settled for average, even absentee, leadership just because we were used to it.

CONSIDER OUR COMPLEX WORLD

President Harry Truman once said, “Men make history, and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.”

I have reflected on this statement by Harry S. Truman for years. While I agree fundamentally with Truman, I also believe that these assertions are not mutually exclusive. *Leaders make*

history, but history also makes leaders. There are situations that seem to draw out some marvelous gifts in leaders; that force them to be sufficient for those situations, capable of climbing to a new level with a team of people. The times they live in seem to beckon their potential. It is only when great leaders prove themselves by living up to the challenges that we recognize the history they have made.

We may just be in such times once again.

Reflect with me on the first two decades of the twenty-first century. History pivoted as our world moved into a new millennium. Those of us who felt our world had already become complicated found it becoming even more complex as the final chapter of the 1990s concluded and we entered the year 2000. Walk with me down memory lane.

- ▼ We began with the Y2K bug. This was a computer flaw that revealed just how vulnerable people are to apocalyptic fears.
- ▼ Next, we saw the dot-com era bubble burst. The financial downturn resulted in thousands losing jobs, money, and market share as companies went belly-up.
- ▼ Then, we endured a terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, sending us into an economic spiral, with companies and nonprofits going out of business.
- ▼ Soon, we witnessed a swelling number of scandals among large corporations such as Enron, Tyco, and Worldcom, which created a national suspicion of corporate corruption.
- ▼ Later came the introduction of the smartphone. In time we saw the addictive nature of these devices and the anxiety they foster. (It has been said: “When our phones had leashes, we were free. Now our phones are free, and we have leashes.”)

- ▼ With the smartphone, we experienced the ubiquitous presence of social media. On these platforms surfaced stalkers, predators, and organizations tracking our activity.
- ▼ The Great Recession of 2008–2009 revealed how few had prepared for a financial downturn. The crisis led to mortgage foreclosures worldwide and caused millions of people to lose their life savings, jobs, and homes.
- ▼ Over the last decade, protests over racial equality, police brutality, gay marriage rights, gun control issues, women’s rights, and sexual assault took center stage.
- ▼ The normalization of student loans became headline news as college tuition debt grew larger than credit card debt in the United States. Forty-two million Americans carry part of that load.
- ▼ Next, we saw an increase in mass shootings in America. In 2019, there were more mass shootings in the United States than days in the year (419).
- ▼ In time, we witnessed the normalization of addictions. From vaping to video games to pornography to social media to opioids and other prescription drugs, we found people used such coping mechanisms to endure their pain, angst, and depression.
- ▼ Political polarization was fostered by an electorate divided over the first minority president in Barack Obama and the first outsider president in Donald Trump.
- ▼ COVID-19 sent all of us home from work and school for months. By the end of 2020, almost 83 million people were infected and over 1.8 million died around the world. A record 6.6 million

Americans applied for unemployment in one week.

It was a time of deep loss and poverty as people attempted to recover from the global outbreak.

- ▼ Finally, mental health issues reached epic proportions among Americans, especially young people. Anxiety is the most common mental health disorder in the United States.

Poor mental health is the unpaid bill of the twenty-first century. It affects nearly one-third of both adolescents and adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. The CDC reported that one in four young adults (ages eighteen to twenty-four) had contemplated suicide during August 2020, due to the pandemic.⁵

By the end of 2020, no one questioned whether we'd be talking about the COVID-19 pandemic for generations. The chief debate is—what do we compare it to? The Great Depression? The Spanish influenza? The 2008 financial crisis? September 11, 2001? World War II?

Is it any wonder that healthy leadership has become such a sought-after skill set? It is uncommon.

Over the course of my lifetime, the art of leadership has become convoluted. While our world has endured difficult eras in the past, including pandemics, world wars, famine, and the like, the times in which we live have shifted from *complicated* to *complex*. Rick Nason explains the shift in his book *It's Not Complicated: The Art and Science of Complexity in Business*.⁶

1. “Complicated” means a difficult situation stares you in the face. A student looking at a chalkboard, trying to solve a math problem in class, may find it complicated. Imagine that student decides to doze off and take a nap for thirty minutes. When the student wakes up, the problem will still be there, but it will be unchanged. Same problem, same

rules, a half hour later. No harder, no easier to solve.

2. “Complex” means a difficult situation stares you in the face that is constantly evolving. An air traffic controller at a commercial airport, helping planes take off and land, faces a tough challenge that doesn’t stay the same. If she wakes up after a thirty-minute nap in the air tower, problems have gotten worse. What was complicated a half hour ago is now complex. Dynamics and nuances are shifting. Much tougher situation to solve.

Against this backdrop, you and I must lead people.

I chuckled at the story of a police academy on its final day of examinations. The officer proctoring the exam described an overwhelming scenario to his class of trainees—complete with a bank robbery, a fire hydrant spraying water everywhere, a person being mugged, a wild car chase, and people screaming as they ran in every direction. It was nothing short of a crisis. Each cadet was to offer what he or she felt would be their response to this horrifying situation.

The most honest answer came from the back of the room. One young trainee stood up and replied: “Remove uniform. Mingle with crowd.”

This is an option we can’t afford.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Leading in the twenty-first century is, indeed, more complex than it was in past centuries. Leadership is seldom easy, but today it affords us the challenge of collaborating with a more educated, more entitled, more savvy population that has greater expectations of satisfaction and rewards than in past generations. Uncommon

leaders stand out because they are able to juggle seemingly contradictory traits to lead such people. They balance paradoxes that make them worth following. Their paradoxical qualities are conspicuous as they require not just intelligence but the differentiating qualities of emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and moral intelligence. In the words of Adam Saenz, they are street smart, book smart, and heart smart.⁷ Consider the following realities.

When people join a team today, they bring with them a higher level of:

1. **Education.** It's no secret that each new generation enjoys more formal education than previous generations. Today's young adults are much better educated than their grandparents, as the share of young adults with a bachelor's degree or higher has steadily climbed since 1968. "Among Millennials, around four-in-ten (39 percent) of those ages 25 to 37 have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with just 15 percent of the Silent Generation, roughly a quarter of Baby Boomers and about three-in-ten Gen Xers (29 percent) when they were the same age."⁸ To be clear, formal education does not equate to smarts but it does equate to an increase in what they expect and assume to be true in their leaders. One reason a leader's style in the 1950s could be more "top down" was fewer people were educated. Folks were more willing to simply be told what to do. Today, not so much.
2. **Entitlement.** A sense of entitlement is defined as "an unrealistic, unmerited, or inappropriate expectation of favorable conditions and favorable treatment at the hands of others." *Psychology Today* reports some examples of entitlement

include a disregard of rules, freeloading, and creating inconveniences to others. It's a form of narcissism causing people to believe they are superior to others; they can be disappointed easily and can feel more deserving of certain perks. Research has discovered that a growing number of people—especially young people—are developing an entitlement complex.⁹ Studies on entitlement by the University of Hampshire found that youth scored 25 percent higher than people aged forty to sixty and 50 percent higher than those over that age range.

3. **Exposure.** Thanks to both media and social media, people joining our teams having been exposed to more content and realities than previous generations. A person (even a teenager) who has a smartphone is exposed to ten thousand messages a day, when you consider posts, ads, TV shows, emails, videos, signs, and conversations in person.¹⁰ This exposure cultivates demands in the minds of team members—they've seen more so they assume they know more. And often they do. Our savvy population, however, has made us less forgiving. Consider the demise of George Washington's hero status of late, because we've discovered the less than heroic realities of his personal life. Savviness usually fosters cynicism and skepticism. May I say the obvious? The more cynical the team member, the more challenging they are to lead.
4. **Emotion.** It is ironic that in a culture with higher levels of education, which, one might assume promotes rationality and logic, we experience extreme expressions of emotion. We see a rise in emotional outbursts, outrage on social

media, political polarization, an unwillingness to compromise, and a rising inability in people to manage their emotions. Instead of objective research, more seek “confirmation bias.” We’re better at reacting than reflecting. Perhaps social media did this to us, but millions today are cognitively advanced, yet socially and emotionally behind. Drama has increased rather than decreased and we’ve been conditioned to crave it. (“Trash TV” is created to elicit emotion.) Our inability to navigate emotions like anxiety, to navigate conflict at work, and our failure to manage jealousy all reveal our need for a new kind of leader.

5. **Expectation.** In general, people today bring with them increased expectations about what they will experience at work. Keep in mind, expectation and entitlement are “second cousins” but they are not “twins.” Entitlement is all about feeling we deserve something, a perk or an experience that is better than average. Expectations simply concern what we presume will happen. One is more about emotions, the other more about thoughts. Both can lead to powerful assumptions that leaders must deal with. Every leader today must understand that the expectations people have of leaders and jobs are on the rise and that conflict is created by the distance between expectations and reality.

Uncommon leaders differentiate themselves because they rise to these challenges. They display the ability to read and then respond to the nuances in a team member’s language, allowing everyone to feel they belong and contribute. They live in the tension of two opposing views, weighing all possibilities, even when

ruthless people demand they take sides or choose an extreme point of view. Uncommon leaders recognize most of life is lived with such tensions. Sadly, most people do not manage their emotions well enough to join them. It's why they need uncommon leaders. People are hungry for them.

Sadly, these leaders are rare because of the complex times in which we live.

Author David Rock writes, "The new generations coming into management positions have different needs from their predecessors. These people expect more from an organization. They want to develop personally; they value freedom and independence. They enjoy diversity and change. These people need a different type of leader than our command and control cultures have been churning out. They need leaders who help them shine, who help them fulfill their potential at work. Leaders who improve their thinking."¹¹

Consider this truth: your influence expands based upon providing the scarcest resource.

Now that information is a commodity, available anywhere upon a search, informed leaders are no longer rare. What is rare is a leader who is socially and emotionally intelligent and who practices the paradoxes we'll discuss in this book with their teams. They bring a stunning form of insight into complex situations and find ways to achieve their goals. They're what past generations called "wise leaders." These leaders are essential today because people are drowning in information and yet starving for wisdom.

THE SECRET SAUCE IS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Most of these paradoxes are about our emotional intelligence, not our cognitive intelligence. It's an issue of EQ, not IQ. For years, predicting effective leaders was a mystery to those who studied it.

Most felt it was merely an issue of *strong personality* and *high intelligence*. Over time, however, we discovered the issue was far more complex than this. The smartest people in the room didn't always make the best leaders. Consider how many times you've said:

How could such a smart person do such a _____ thing?

You fill in the blank: irrational, illogical, dumb, stupid, and so on. There is nothing more common than high-potential people who allow their emotional deficits to sabotage their careers. This is at least part of the reason we hear the cliché, *The straight A students will work for their C student peers one day*. Why? The C students had to make up for lower intelligence by learning to read social and emotional cues, while the smart kids relied merely on their intellect.

Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves explain, "When emotional intelligence was first discovered, it served as the missing link in a peculiar finding: people with the highest levels of intelligence (IQ) outperform those with average IQ just 20 percent of the time, while people with average IQs outperform those with high IQs 70 percent of the time. This anomaly threw a massive monkey wrench into what many people had always assumed was the source of success—IQ. Scientists realized there must be another variable that explained success above and beyond one's IQ, and years of research and countless studies pointed to emotional intelligence as the critical factor."¹²

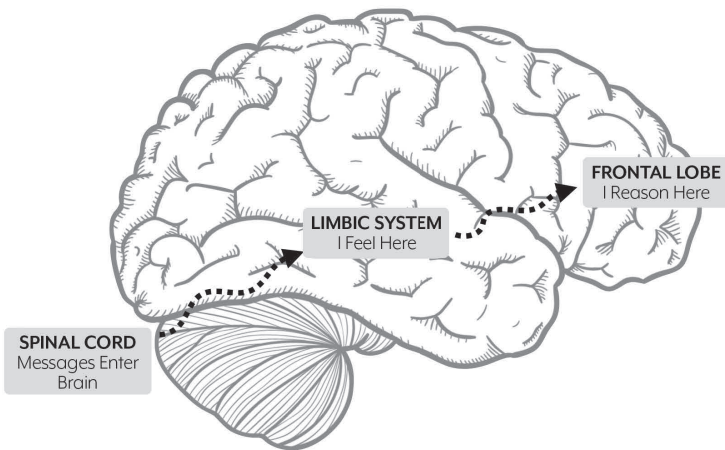
Social and emotional intelligence is "your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships."¹³ The good news is that while IQ doesn't change much over our lifetime, EQ can be developed. We learn how to obtain and memorize information in school, but rarely are taught how to manage emotions and social cues. We enter our careers knowing how to read and report on the knowledge we've consumed but too often lack

the skills to manage our emotions in the heat of the challenging problems we face. I often tell university students: *Success in school is 75 percent IQ and 25 percent EQ. In your career, it will be the opposite.*

The Emotional Intelligence Appraisal is the largest assessment of EQ in the world. Developed by TalentSmart, it has been taken by more than half a million respondents. The results are nothing less than astonishing. Over 90 percent of high performers are also high in emotional intelligence.¹⁴ Coincidence? I don't think so.

Here's what's happening inside a leader's brain every day.

Every message your brain receives—everything you hear, see, smell, taste, and touch—comes via your spinal cord. Electronic signals are sent from that spinal cord and must pass through your limbic system (where you feel) on their way to the frontal lobe (where you reason). As you can see in the diagram below, the part of the brain where your emotions reside lies in the middle of the road as messages travel to where rational thinking happens. Further, the prefrontal cortex (the frontal lobe) is the last area to develop as your brain matures. The prefrontal cortex is typically undeveloped in teens, for example, which can manifest in extremely dramatic, emotional, and even irrational behavior. The area where they calculate consequences for actions isn't fully developed.



Although we are the most educated population in human history, we missed something in the education process: *training ourselves to manage our emotions*. We focused on academic or cognitive development at the expense of our emotional intelligence. We've filled our brains with reasonable content for our frontal lobe to store, but many of our interactions never make it past our limbic system.

There might just be an elephant in the room.

NYU leadership ethics professor Jonathan Haidt calls this phenomenon “the elephant and the rider.”¹⁵ He says that inside every one of us is a “rider” (our conscious, rational mind) sitting atop an “elephant” (our subconscious mind). That rider is much smaller than the elephant and often the elephant goes wherever it wants to, as the rider pretends to be in charge. When we feel strongly about something and emote—all the while rationalizing our emotional response—we have handed the reins to the elephant. We become brilliant justifiers of what we've blurted out, even when it's illogical to listeners. The issue we're debating isn't really the issue.

When Jack Welch was asked in an interview what the biggest mistake of his career was, he instantly replied, “Buying an investment bank.” When questioned why, he said, “Because I didn't understand the culture.” So often, a company is bought out and the CEOs assume the transaction is merely “complicated.” In reality, the situation is complex, filled with colliding egos between managers, nuances in interactions, and different personalities and cultures that must blend. People are fluid and unpredictable—and that's good news and bad news.

In 1968, the New York Central and Pennsylvania Railroads merged to form Penn Central, which became the sixth-largest corporation in America. But just two years later, the company shocked Wall Street by filing for bankruptcy protection, making it the largest corporate bankruptcy in American history at the time. What happened? The problem couldn't be reduced to plugging

in an algorithm and making a transaction. The leaders assumed it was merely complicated.

Managing people is a complex challenge. So is integrating two companies or figuring out how the market will react to a new product or strategy. Maybe you'll get lucky and figure it out once, but whatever you do the next time may not generate the same result.

Paradoxes are one answer to the complex challenges we face.

WHAT IS A PARADOXICAL LEADER?

As I spoke with one CEO recently, he grieved: *I must be a strategist, a cheerleader, a storyteller, a therapist, a futurist, and a motivational speaker.* Indeed, he may be right. I believe embracing these types of paradoxes may be our only saving grace in such complex times.

Defined simply, a paradox is an apparently incongruous or absurd proposition that, when investigated or explained, may prove to be well founded and true. And because the two parts of a paradox seem contradictory, we often fail to see the truth in them. How can these two opposing realities coexist? Only after careful examination does it make sense. Let me illustrate.

Countries and US states with higher happiness levels tend to have higher suicide rates, according to research led by Mary C. Daly of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.

This appears paradoxical until you consider that someone who is thinking of suicide may be even more vulnerable if they look around and everyone else appears extremely happy.

It's a paradox yet it's true.

While we were quarantined during the COVID-19 pandemic, the volume of road traffic declined measurably in Atlanta, where I live, yet traffic accidents rose. How could fewer cars lead to more accidents? It's ironic until you consider that because there were fewer automobiles on the road, people tended to drive faster and more recklessly, leading to more crashes.

It's a paradox yet it's true.

Paradoxes are strange, and yet, I believe they explain the unexplainable in effective leaders. Because our world today includes so many complex angles, only leaders who can serve in a multidimensional fashion have any hope of thriving in such volatile times. Embodying paradox has long separated exceptional people from average ones. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, "The test of first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

Over the course of this book, I'll lead a reflection on some of the most important paradoxes essential for leading brilliantly during this third decade of the twenty-first century. To guide leaders in addressing these heightened expectations, this book explores and illustrates eight surprising paradoxes that effective leaders must practice as they lead. Embodying them enables us to stand out as extraordinary because:

1. Great leaders balance confidence and humility.
2. Great leaders leverage their vision and their blind spots.
3. Great leaders embrace visibility and invisibility.
4. Great leaders are stubborn and open-minded.
5. Great leaders are deeply personal and inherently collective.
6. Great leaders are both teachers and learners.
7. Great leaders model high standards and gracious forgiveness.
8. Great leaders are timely and timeless.

As you examine the chapter topics above, you'll quickly recognize that most of what differentiates uncommon leaders is their ability to read a situation before they lead a situation. They manage their emotions, observe their people, and choose the wisest response to reach their goal. They *adapt to adversity* and continue chasing their

goal rather than merely *adopting adversity* as their dictator. In doing so, they embrace the necessary paradoxes along the way.

I began this chapter with the story of Isaac Newton, a college student who turned a pandemic into a “year of wonders.” He created calculus, developed his theories on optics, and discovered the laws of gravity and motion. None of this may have happened had he not endured an interruption in his normal, busy routines at school, where professors directed his studies. Everyone benefited, including young Isaac Newton. He returned to Cambridge in 1667, with his theories in hand. Within six months, he was made a fellow. Two years later, he became a professor. Not bad for a twentysomething.

The concept is so simple, it eludes us. It was because Isaac Newton couldn’t stay busy with his routine work that he made some of his most important discoveries. His *break* became a *breakthrough*. As I said, his *interruption* became an *introduction* to new discoveries. He chose to make his problem a possibility; to make his obstacles opportunities. When he chose to invest his time, not waste it, the stumbling block to his education . . . became a stepping-stone for growth.

So, how was this paradox created?

It appears Newton didn’t see the plague as an interruption. He welcomed the change and leveraged being kicked off campus to learn in new ways. He took advantage of his solitude to muse and to create. Today, I think most people run from solitude. We are conditioned to put our earplugs in and fill our heads with noise. Turn the radio on. Drown out the boredom. While there’s nothing wrong with this—it frequently prevents original thinking. Neuroscientists tell us that it’s during times of boredom that our brains develop empathy and creativity. Fortunately, Isaac Newton had no video games or television with which to squander time. When nothing and no one consumed his time—he had time to reflect, imagine, and change the world.

Today, I think it’s our best option in this complex world.



1

Uncommon Leaders Balance Both Confidence and Humility

Michael Dammann Eisner served as the chairman and CEO of the Walt Disney Company for more than twenty years, from 1984 to 2005. Under his leadership, the Disney brand was reawakened. From animated films like *The Little Mermaid* (1989) to commercial acquisitions like Miramax Films, ABC, and ESPN, Michael Eisner led with confidence.

It was during this time, however, that Disney also accrued a reputation for being tough negotiators and even tougher business partners. Their power was expanding, and they knew it. Eisner gained a reputation for hiring and firing people abruptly, for being unpredictable, and for going to court over issues that could have been resolved easily with less ego. Over time, Eisner became increasingly isolated and overbearing, which ultimately led to a shareholder revolt and his own dismissal. His final years, many say, were marked by self-destructive behavior, arrogant attitudes, and unnecessary emotion-driven public battles.

Enter Robert “Bob.”

Bob Iger is a very different sort of leader than Eisner. He was a Disney executive that Michael Eisner swore would never become CEO. Yet Bob, who’d worked under the ABC and Disney brands for thirty years, had been slowly and effectively executing his responsibilities. Although Disney board members looked outside the company for a new CEO, they soon recognized that the right person might just be under their noses.

Bob Iger replaced Eisner and became the chief executive officer in 2005. During the previous three decades, he had had the opportunity to get hands-on experience in every facet of the television industry, from sports, to news, to entertainment. He was exposed to and participated in program acquisition, rights negotiations, and business affairs. And in most of this experience, he felt like a rookie being called up to the big leagues. Iger’s autobiography, *The Ride of a Lifetime*, details how, at each stage of his career, he was asked to do something he’d never done before—and always on an increasingly larger platform with more stakeholders watching. For instance, when Capital Cities Communications bought ABC, it blindsided everyone in the company. Almost immediately, Bob was asked to become the president of ABC Entertainment. He writes in his book:

It wasn’t quite leaping without a parachute, but it felt a lot like a free fall at first. I told myself: You have a job. They’re expecting you to turn this business around. Your inexperience can’t be an excuse for failure.¹

Bob Iger differentiated himself from the more experienced Michael Eisner in that he never left his humble, teachable mindset as he forged ahead. He remained authentic. He believed the first rule is to not “fake anything.” He’d say:

You have to be humble, and you can’t pretend to be someone you’re not or to know something you don’t. You’re also

in a position of leadership, though, so you can't let humility prevent you from leading. It's a fine line, and something I preach today. You have to ask the questions you need to ask, admit without apology what you don't understand and do the work to learn what you need to learn as quickly as you can.²

THE PARADOX

Iger embodies a paradox I see uncommon leaders practice that sets them apart from old-school leadership, which is too often undermined by hubris and prevents such leaders from seeing certain realities.

Leading today requires combining these two attributes—confidence and humility. Reality changes so quickly, leaders cannot become arrogant, but must remain in a learning posture. At the same time, team members long for their leader to inspire them with confidence. Iger concluded, “There’s nothing less confidence inspiring than a person faking a knowledge they don’t possess. True authority and true leadership come from knowing who you are and not pretending to be anything else.”³

When Capital Cities acquired ABC, Bob was called upon to lead the network, which represented the merger of both companies. Bob reminisces:

Back then, the head of any of the (big) three networks was one of the most powerful people in television (a fact that seemed surreal to me), but to everyone in the industry, I was a looming question mark. I had no sense of how things were done in Hollywood, and no experience managing relationships with creative people or working with their representatives. I didn't speak their language. I didn't understand their culture. To them, I was a suit from New

York who suddenly—for reasons that must have seemed baffling—had immense influence over their creative life. So, every day, I met with the managers and agents, writers, directors, and TV stars that Stu and Ted (my executive team) lined up for me. In most of those meetings, I had the distinct sensation of being poked and prodded in an effort to figure out who I was and what the hell I was doing there.⁴

I can only imagine what it must have felt like to be the executive leader but feel like the people under me were constantly questioning my right and ability to give them direction or to make good decisions on their behalf. It's a recipe for egos to flare up; to remind everyone who wore the badge and how the CEO had the right to fire anyone if he wanted to do so. This happens every year between executives and team members.

But Bob Iger refused to let his ego get the best of him.

Rather than trying too hard to impress whoever was across the table, he knew he needed to resist the urge to pretend he knew what he was doing. Instead, he asked a lot of questions, expressing his need for what others had to offer. This sort of expression is disarming to most humans. Bob knew when he arrived in Hollywood that he didn't have a big personality or any obvious swagger. He barely knew anyone in town. In light of this, he could either wilt under the power plays of agents and actors and display his insecurity, or he could leverage his "un-Hollywood-ness" to be a kind of mystery that worked to his advantage.

When Bob Iger became the chairman and CEO of the Walt Disney Company, he returned to the approach that had served him well. He didn't pretend to be Michael Eisner (which worked in his favor) or to be Walt Disney. He humbly demonstrated he was himself:

- ▼ He listened more than he spoke.

- ▼ He learned more than he taught.
- ▼ He sought to add value more than gain value.

And he won people over, one person at a time.

Because he led in this fashion, when he made a confident decision, people felt he was believable. His humility balanced his confidence and magnetically convinced others to side with him even when they saw things differently. His confidence was real but came in smaller doses, mixed with humble listening along the way. The fact is, each step along the way, people felt he wasn't qualified for the new job, and often Bob would smile and agree. Then he'd assume a learning posture with those very same people, all of whom agreed they wanted the company to flourish.

Bob built collaborators, not combatants. People didn't feel they needed to *compete* with him, but to *complete* him.

This was never clearer than when Bob Iger met with Steve Jobs to discuss how they could resuscitate the relationship between Disney and Pixar. When Michael Eisner led Disney, he and Jobs (original chairman of Pixar) represented two big egos at the table, both striving for the upper hand in the negotiations. I'm sure it felt like two male peacocks spreading their wings in pride to see who'd win the contest. Such displays usually result in win/lose equations.

When Iger took over, he contacted Steve to see if he'd meet with him. The two men didn't really know each other, so neither knew exactly what to expect, but in a relatively short time, Iger won Steve Jobs over. As you'd likely expect by this point, when he met with Jobs, Iger took a completely different approach:

1. Iger acknowledged he was in new territory.
2. He communicated that he wanted to add value to Pixar.
3. He said he felt unqualified to lead such an amazing brand like Disney.

4. He relayed his belief that both teams could be better if they worked together.

This effectively illustrates a helpful lesson for leaders. Leaders who are emotionally insecure will sabotage their ability to expand further or to go deeper in relationships. They will naturally put up walls, especially with competitive people. Potential partners are seen with suspicion, not expectation. Leaders perceive that strong counterparts represent one of three possibilities to them:

1. **Threat.** The person is a threat to their own power, position, and prestige.
2. **Thorn.** The person is simply viewed as a thorn in their side who must be removed.
3. **Thrive.** The person is seen as an asset who may enable them to improve and flourish.

Too often, Michael Eisner saw Steve Jobs as a threat. In contrast, Bob Iger saw how they could thrive together. Slowly, Iger began to undo the tangled knot created by the dysfunctional Jobs and

How are you naturally perceived by others—as more humble or more confident?

Eisner relationship. Finally, one evening, Bob decided to float a crazy idea by Steve. Bob began by admitting it was a crazy idea. He suggested that maybe Disney could purchase Pixar. After a moment of silence, Jobs responded, “That’s not such a crazy idea.” Then, Steve explained that while he was open to dialogue, he would not make a unilateral decision without involving John Lasseter and Ed Catmull, Jobs’s leaders of the Pixar animation team. Although it wasn’t a crazy idea—it was a big idea. Bob agreed to meet with both men . . . and won them over. The

purchase was made, and Steve Jobs and his Pixar crew joined the Disney empire.

What I love most about the deal was the way Bob won them all over. He told them if they'd sell Pixar to Disney, they would become the advisors for *all* Disney animation. After all, since Pixar led the way in computer animation, they should direct it all. In other words, the buyers became the learners. It was a picture of confidence and humility.

Over time, Bob Iger and Steve Jobs became friends. When Steve passed away in October 2011, Bob and his wife, Willow, were part of a handful of people who were invited to his memorial. They'd forged a partnership that Michael Eisner was unable to envision and had advised against. Why? The combination of humility and confidence seldom makes sense to those who don't possess it. It's hard to explain.

But allow me to try.

HOW CONFIDENCE AND HUMILITY CREATE MOMENTUM

Herein lies the big idea: uncommon leaders possess inspiring confidence yet express it with palpable humility.

In today's complex world, people look for anyone with a clear sense of confidence. Teams seldom move forward without seeing it in their leader. At the same time, people demand that a leader's confidence doesn't blind them to their own humanity. Leaders believe in themselves, but they don't believe they can do it alone. Dacher Keltner said, "The seductions of power induce us to lose the very skills that enabled us to gain power in the first place."⁵

Confidence plus humility furnishes the *energy of certainty* and the *flexibility of teachability* to create synergy in partnerships. Bob Iger found this to be true in his interactions with George Lucas (when he purchased Lucasfilm), with Ike Perlmutter (when he bought Marvel), and with Steve Jobs (when he bought Pixar). Bob was a learner but brought to the table enough confidence—even

audacity—to make the pitch to these CEOs. Only confidence, even self-confidence, can catapult a leader from average to extraordinary.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF CONFIDENCE

Because twenty-first century culture is increasingly uncertain and because our global economy is increasingly complicated and unpredictable, team members long for a sense of confidence. I believe one of the leader's tasks is to instill this in their team. This doesn't mean leaders have all the answers up front, nor does it mean they're absolutely certain everything will pan out according to plan. It simply means that, as our world experiences uncertainty, the human longing for confidence grows proportionately. Uncommon leaders understand this need and leverage it to increase their influence.

When leaders are confident, their symptoms of confidence become contagious:

- ▼ Their passion and energy become viral.
- ▼ Their clarity tends to motivate people to act.
- ▼ They pass on a sense of security to their team.
- ▼ Their sense of ownership expands to others.
- ▼ Their assurance that something must be done spreads.

Confidence can leak over time. The older we get, the more experience we gain, and the more cynical we become. After decades, our worldview changes; we no longer blindly trust others; we become self-protective; we see how selfish and immature even adults can be—and our confidence can wane. This is why a child can be so confident about skateboarding down a hill and his parents feel they must explain why he should be more careful.

Or a young girl can be so confident about her freedom on social media, blind to predators who prey on kids.

Confidence *reigns* in the young. And it tends to *wane* over time.

Consider how many movements in history were led by young, idealistic, energetic, and even naïve people. Along with that idealism comes confidence. And frequently, that confidence paid off. Joan of Arc. William Wilberforce. Martin Luther King Jr. Abolitionist movements. Women’s rights movements. Voting rights movements. Civil rights and equal rights movements. Thousands of followers in those movements simply needed permission to act. And it was a confident leader (or leaders) who gave them that permission through their confidence.

The fact is, people follow confident leaders. Most people lack confidence and admire someone who’s convinced and convicted to move in a certain direction. I believe people follow the leader who is clearest and most confident, not necessarily the one who is right. This is why religious cult leaders can gain a following—they attract unsuspecting people who crave confidence.

Let me focus in on why your people *want you* to be a confident leader. As our lives become more complicated and overwhelming, people feel they don’t have time to research every decision they must make. We’re tired and begin to look for “gatekeepers” who share our values and help us make good decisions. Celebrity endorsements. Wise authors. Social media influencers. Mavens. Political figures. Uncle Charlie. These “gatekeepers” become a sort of leader to us; such people do our homework for us and remove our need to think deeply about everything. We trust their opinion. When they’re confident and can articulate their perspective, we feel comfortable moving in the same direction they’re moving. They’re often the ones who provide clarity in a confusing world, full of gray areas. The clear direction they offer makes us grasp what next step to take—and we like ourselves when we’re clearer. This is why we value confidence in leaders.

For twenty years of my career, I served on John C. Maxwell's leadership team. John is an incredible author and a leader who seldom lacks confidence. He is a good thinker, he is a memorable communicator, and he is sure of his direction. When he makes decisions, he is clear and certain, even when he isn't always accurate. This not only has attracted a large staff, but millions of readers and followers over the decades. People value his confidence. Here are three observations I made as I served under him:

1. **His confidence was attractive.** As I mentioned above, those of us who possessed less confidence could borrow his and feel better about our lives. I recall attending a board of directors meeting when a "gray," even controversial, topic surfaced. A decision had to be made. Although several on that board saw the issue differently, John Maxwell listened then shared confidently why we should move in a certain direction. By decision time, everyone was attracted to his confidence and voted accordingly.
2. **His confidence was energizing.** Our team drew upon his energy, deriving from his confidence that our goal could be reached. We absorbed his energy and applied it toward our mutual objective. This was quite common. John Maxwell was once in a fast-food restaurant drive-through lane. When he got to the window, he asked if he could buy a simple cup of ice. No soft drink; just ice. The teenage clerk replied, "Oh, sorry, I can't do that." When John smiled and said, "Yes, you can!" she smiled back and said, "OK!" And John left with his cup of ice.
3. **His confidence invited ideas.** Because Maxwell was confident, we all felt it was worthwhile to apply

our own ideas to the goal. After all, if we were sure to reach it, why not own it and add to it? John's confidence was the result of his emotional security. More than once, he'd share an idea for raising funds for a need around the world, and before we knew it, our entire leadership team was adding to his idea, building off of his belief that we could, indeed, pull it off. Time and again, I watched confidence breed creativity.

The truth is, confidence makes leadership believable. If people don't have a sense that you are confident—even self-confident—they may not have the confidence to follow you. If you don't believe in yourself, your people will find it difficult to believe in you. If you're tentative about your direction, your people will certainly be. Confidence usually comes first, even before competence (although both are essential).

In any case, leaders need confidence, and it's important we understand what our personal level of confidence is. In his book *Confident Leader!—Become One, Stay One*, my friend Dan Reiland suggests confidence isn't a topic most people think or talk a lot about. Most of us feel confident until we make some big decision like choosing a school for our child, buying a home, or taking on a huge project at work. Then, suddenly, we're different people. We don't want to look foolish by failing or fumbling or falling down. In these big moments, most of us shrink from our normally self-assured manner. I asked Dan what percentage of leaders he interviewed were over-confident and how many were under-confident. He believes about three in ten consistently struggle with over-confidence. Most of us have normal levels of confidence until we hit a wall. Then, about seven in ten struggle with under-confidence. We end up striving to construct a narrative of confidence inside ourselves and our team.⁶

BEWARE OF OVERCONFIDENCE

Unfortunately, over time and when left unchecked, confidence can morph into something unhelpful for leaders. This is what we call ego. It fogs our objectivity. It diminishes our logic. As leaders succeed, they become convinced they'll continue to win; some even blindly believe they can do no wrong.

The more we succeed, the larger our ego can grow. Momentum can cause us to look better than we really are. Over time, confidence can be fed by our egos and our egos by our confidence. There's a fine line between confidence and cockiness. In today's world, many among the emerging generation of young professionals see confident leaders cross that line and become arrogant. These leaders don't want to be questioned; they don't want any roadblocks in their way. They can suspect that if someone interrogates them, that person must not believe in their mission. The line is blurred between the organization's progress and people's submission to the leader. This kind of arrogance is nauseating. And this is the one big reason why humility plays a necessary role.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF HUMILITY

In Jim Collins's classic book *Good to Great*, he introduced us to "Level Five Leaders." These are the ones who reached the top; the leaders who took their company from being "good" to being "great." His research team was shocked by what they found in these people. He expected those companies to be led by charismatic leaders, with huge personalities and even bigger egos. Instead, he found the opposite. They were leaders with a surprising sense of humility. They had no illusion they'd accomplished a goal alone. Collins wrote that when something went wrong, they looked in the *mirror* and said: "How can I improve to lead this team

better?” When something went right, they looked out the *window* and said: “Look at this team. Look at what they achieved.”⁷

Both confidence and humility are attractive, and doubly so when combined.

Humility makes your confidence believable.

When team members *only* see confidence, they begin to suspect you’re not being honest; some piece of the puzzle is missing. They know all leaders eventually make mistakes, and followers begin wondering: When can I trust you? Confidence alone feels disingenuous.

When you demonstrate humility, you communicate credibility. Humility signals self-awareness and authenticity. A person who’s always confident and has little humility creates suspicions in team members. Not unlike the person who always uses hyperbole to make their point. People stop trusting this kind of leader. They know their leader is human and begin thinking, “You can’t be so sure all the time.” Eventually, they stop taking the leader seriously.

Jason is a manager who faced this challenge last year. He was placed in charge of a team and immediately turned into the equivalent of a motivational speaker while in front of them. He talked about his big vision, about how great everyone was, and about how they could not fail. I spoke to his team members shortly after Jason took over. While every one of them appreciated his positive attitude, his certainty did not bode well. They were too savvy about the difficulties they regularly faced and didn’t “buy” Jason’s superficial confidence. He came across as naïve.

Jason needed a reality check.

I consulted with him and suggested he add humility to his magnificent attitude. If his team saw him acknowledge that their objectives were tough and there may just be some long days ahead—adding a word of confidence would have been just what they needed. He would have been believable.

Humility signals transparency and invites reciprocation.

When you are humble, you display your humanity and acknowledge your imperfections. When team members see this, they're likely to volley it right back. Our brains are hardwired to do this. Belonging works from the outside in. When in groups, our brain lights up differently depending on the social cues we exchange with others. When vulnerability cues are sent, the amygdala switches from *protection mode* to *partner mode* in team members. It moves from "fight or flight" norms to understanding and empathy. Humility signals that you are a human first (before you're a boss) and invites others to connect and help. People want to reciprocate with transparency and trust.⁸

Alison Wood Brooks, from Harvard Business School, conducted an experiment that illustrates this. She described two scenarios to people and asked them how they would respond:

1. You are at a train station; it is raining. A stranger approaches you to ask: "Can I borrow your cell phone?"
2. You are at a train station; it is raining. A stranger approaches you to say: "I'm sorry about the rain. Can I borrow your cell phone?"

Later, Brooks asked her respondents how they believed the overall population might respond to this scenario. The vast majority predicted the scenarios wouldn't matter; either way, most people wouldn't give up their cell phone to a stranger. They were wrong. Brooks and her team found that a full 422 percent more people said "yes" in the second scenario than said "yes" in the first. A simple but clear signal of empathy and shared humanity made all the difference in the world. Suddenly, the person asking the question had become real and transparent.⁹

Humility makes you magnetic.

When humility is present alongside confidence it makes the leader easier to follow. It is attractive to people. Sometimes we don't know why we are drawn to humble leaders, but we are. We feel they are reachable, teachable, and touchable, not some prima donna who resides in an ivory tower. As I mentioned earlier, when humility is present, trust deepens among team members. When leaders are humble, they pull people toward them instead of pushing them away. NYU social neuroscientist Jay Van Bavel says, "The moment you're part of a group, the amygdala tunes in to who's in that group and starts intensely tracking them. These people were strangers before; now they're important to you. It's such a powerful switch; a total reconfiguration of the entire motivational decision-making system. The whole dynamic changes."

I have a theory I call "The Calcutta Paradox."¹⁰ (It's one of our *Habitudes—Images That Form Leadership Habits and Attitudes*®.) What enabled Mother Teresa of Calcutta to attract so many people? It was the fact that she was humble and didn't like attention—that magnetically drew others to her. It was the fact that she *didn't* pursue fame that made her famous.

I believe people possess a sense of fairness inside them. Whenever a leader exaggerates their importance, others tend to want to downsize the inflated description to be more accurate. Similarly, when a leader brushes off their own importance with humility, downplaying their value, others listening see a void and want to fill it.

Andy is a friend of mine who's an author. Whenever I've heard him talk about one of his books, he tends to be humble and underestimate its value. Can you guess what others say when he does this? They want to rave about it, to right-size people's understanding. Why? Because the leader didn't do it. People tend to fill what is lacking in a leader's self-description and empty what is too full.

When we brush fame aside, when we downplay our accomplishments, it is winsome and magnetic to people.

Humility welcomes team members to help you lead.

When you're humble you invite the input and insight of those on your team. Working together is not a *contest* in which to compete; it is a *puzzle* you must complete. Eventually, you have other leaders helping you reach a shared goal, not merely hirelings working on your goal.

Years ago, engineer and designer Peter Skillman and his team decided to study teamwork. They experimented with students at Stanford, UC Berkeley, and the University of Tokyo, challenging them to build the tallest structure possible using uncooked spaghetti, masking tape, a yard of string, and a marshmallow. Skillman's study had less to do with the *task* and more to do with the *participants*. His team also gathered some kindergarten students to attempt the same goal with the same materials. They were testing how team culture emerged among the participants.

Can you guess who built the tallest structure?

In dozens of experiments, the kindergartners built structures that averaged twenty-six inches tall, while the business school students' structures averaged ten inches tall. Later, Skillman had attorneys and CEOs take on the kindergartners—and they lost as well. How did children defeat adults?

1. Adults engaged in what psychologists call “status management.” They became preoccupied with recognition and aware of how they appeared to others.
2. Kindergarten kids engaged in shoulder-to-shoulder exploration. The children didn't care who had the idea or got credit. They focused on solving the problem.¹¹

I believe Skillman's experiments are a picture of what natural humility accomplishes. When leaders drop pretense, they create the opportunity for their team to accomplish more than would otherwise be possible.

BOTH OLD AND YOUNG DESIRE HUMILITY IN THEIR LEADERS

Today, educated team members *desire* and often *demand* humility. I know six friends who've recently left their companies due to ego-driven bosses. Not long ago I met with team members who served as part-time and full-time employees in various industries. I asked them about their supervisors, and their responses were telling:

- ▼ "I think my boss just likes hearing himself talk."
- ▼ "My supervisor's ego is ginormous. I've learned to just smile and agree with him. But we all laugh at him behind his back."
- ▼ "I'm already looking for work somewhere else. She doesn't get me and doesn't care."
- ▼ "Everyone seems so fake where I work. I'd rather take less pay and work someplace where they keep it real and show a little authenticity."

These are comments made by staff from among the Millennial Generation and Generation Z. But these young team members aren't the only ones who recognize the problem of leaders who lack humility. I also took advantage of an opportunity to meet with senior citizens (all eighty years old or older) and asked them to reflect on their careers and bosses. Most of these people described their work experience with something like the following:

Overconfident and ego-driven bosses existed back in my day, too. We didn't like them either—but decades ago, we felt we just had to endure them. We didn't want to lose our jobs.

Today, things are a bit different.

The demise of the overconfident leader has been evident all through history. Consider two Roman emperors, Julius Caesar (101–40 BC) and Augustus (63 BC–AD 14). Julius Caesar and Rome are synonymous. As a military leader, he conquered more territory than Alexander the Great. And he was genuinely better at stepping back from his conquest and organizing what he won. In the end, however, Julius Caesar came to believe that his success was the result of his divine status. His ego blinded him to the conspiracies going on behind his back. Those plots not only ended his career, but his life.

But it didn't have to be this way.

Caesar Augustus was different. He took reign after Julius Caesar and was arguably Rome's most successful manager of ambition and confidence. He led the biggest and most profitable empire in history for more than forty years, and yet, in spite of his success, he modestly referred to himself as Rome's *primus inter pares*, or "first among equals." Augustus kept a sensible perspective on himself. "Even though he became the undisputed ruler of millions and the richest man in the ancient world, he listened to others and understood the value of moving cautiously and thoughtfully on everything from building roads to conducting wars. His favorite expression was 'festina lente,' or 'make haste slowly.'"¹²

Augustus stands out because this kind of measured ambition plus genuine humility is rare, indeed, when it comes to leaders.

Today, overconfidence and ego show up just as consistently as in the past. Illustrations include Dennis Kozlowski who served as CEO of Tyco; Hank Greenberg, CEO of AIG; George Zimmer,

CEO of Men’s Warehouse; and Sandy Weill, CEO of Citicorp. Look up their stories. They were ambitious conquerors who were brought down by their egos and hubris. In the end, these leaders focused on what flattered instead of what mattered.

Summary of this paradox

MY CONFIDENCE	MY HUMILITY
1. Makes my leadership believable.	1. Makes my confidence believable.
2. Communicates energy and certainty.	2. Communicates trustworthiness.
3. Fosters creativity and participation.	3. Fosters authenticity and participation.
4. Causes team members to be passionate.	4. Causes team members to be loyal.
5. Is contagious in others.	5. Is contagious in others.

HOW TO BE A CONFIDENT YET HUMBLE LEADER

As I close each of the chapters on these eight paradoxes, I will offer some ideas on how you can begin practicing these paradoxes in your own leadership.

1. When in decision-making meetings, argue as if you believe you’re right, but listen as if you believe you’re wrong.¹³
2. When in conflict with team members, be willing to lose a few battles to win the war. Predetermine what “hills you’re willing to die on.”
3. Remain teachable in new contexts, even from those under your care. Don’t let your confidence prevent you from improving your own ideas.

4. Refuse to cross the line between confidence and cockiness. Confidence believes you can do the job. Cockiness believes it will be easy.
5. Don't confuse confidence with certainty. You'll frequently have to take action without certainty as a leader. Even when uncertain, remain clear and transparent.
6. Don't let humility become sheepishness. When we're sheepish, we are self-conscious, preoccupied with our own weaknesses. This keeps us from progress.
7. As you meet with teammates, you must know what you don't know and trust in what you do. Be clear on the difference between the two.
8. If you possess a strong ego on the job, take time to list your shortcomings and mistakes. Remind yourself of your humanity by reviewing these regularly.
9. When tempted to boast about what you achieved, instantly turn your focus to a team member and brag about them. Let someone else do your boasting.

Almost thirty years ago, I spoke at a chapel service before a ball game between the San Diego Padres and the Chicago Cubs. Ryne Sandberg was an all-star second baseman for the Cubs at the time. And he got paid very well for his skills. Unfortunately, that year Ryne was in a hitting slump and wasn't playing near his potential. He and I talked after the meeting and he confessed to me it really hurt to be doing so poorly but paid so well. He also told me it angered the fans in Chicago. Fans and reporters criticized him for being this highly paid athlete who didn't perform. And the ball club wasn't happy either. It was a difficult time for everyone.

Several weeks later, however, I remember reading how Ryne decided to handle his situation. In addition to improving his swing, he met with the general manager of the Cubs and offered a large chunk of his salary back to the team. Yes—you read that right. He told them he didn't feel right about taking millions of dollars when he wasn't performing up to his potential. He wanted to give some money back. Wow.

Needless to say, Ryne won the fans over by this act. Those who had booed him—were now praising him . . . even before he got his good swing back. Why? He assumed a humble position (even as he remained confident that he would regain his previous hitting prowess) and won their hearts.

Humility doesn't mean weakness. Next-generation leaders are strong and confident—but they're secure enough to see beyond themselves. They're not worried about their image. They know their value, but it isn't about them. They have nothing to prove, nothing to lose, and nothing to hide. The mission is bigger than they are.

THINK IT THROUGH, TALK IT OVER

- ▼ Do you know leaders who balance these two qualities well?
- ▼ Who do you know who struggles with either of the two?
- ▼ What do you struggle with in your leadership: humility or confidence?
- ▼ Why do you think keeping a balance between the two is so challenging?



2

Uncommon Leaders Leverage Both Their Vision and Their Blind Spots

Sara Treleaven Blakely graduated from Florida State University in 1993 and soon found herself trudging door to door as a salesperson, selling fax machines for Danka, an office supply company.

Just what every college graduate wants to do upon graduation, right?

Well, it turns out that Sara was good at it. By the age of twenty-five, she was promoted to national sales trainer at Danka and began teaching others how to sell their products. She remembers wearing professional clothes with pantyhose and nice shoes as she went from store to store, in the blazing hot Florida sun. The hose didn't look or feel good to her. While she could appreciate the advantages of pantyhose, she wondered if women might be willing to buy a version without their antiquated appearance. As she dreamed up the idea, she also thought of a name: an entirely new industry called "shapewear."

THE ORIGIN OF SPANX

It was at this point that Sara attended a private party and decided to try an experiment. She cut off the feet of a pair of pantyhose and wore them under a pair of slacks. The result? It achieved the look she wanted, but the stockings crept up her legs, making her feel uncomfortable. She continued to experiment and eventually created what she later called Spanx. (The original pair is now enshrined at her headquarters.)¹

Her next step was to relocate to Atlanta and pursue this invention.

When she arrived in Atlanta, Sara was twenty-seven, with \$5,000 in her bank account and a big vision. She immediately began researching how to best scale a piece of women's apparel that would be a combination of hosiery and girdle and be both comfortable and affordable. She drove to North Carolina, a haven for hosiery mills, to show them her prototype. One by one, she was turned down by every representative she met. During the visits, she recognized that every company was run by men—who obviously never wore the products they sold. Sara knew this would make her journey an uphill climb.

Sometime later, however, she got the break she needed.

One of the representatives had told his daughters about Spanx and they convinced their dad it was a great idea. He called her and Sara got the support she needed. (No pun intended.) Over the course of the next year, the prototype was modified and modified again. When Blakely felt she had a product she'd be proud to sell, she used her credit card and spent all of her savings to cover attorney fees and purchase a patent.

Have you noticed that when folks capture a vision, it often captures them right back?