

# A Leader's Story

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It is a rare delight that during my busy days as a senior administrator I have an opportunity to reflect on leadership. It is even rarer that I have time to capture my reflections in writing. Just a while ago, I had one of these most rare opportunities. Below is the story of my 're-realization' that personal growth is integrally connected to leadership growth.

It began with comments from John Maxwell, the author of *21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, who wrote:

"Leaders develop daily, not in a day." Our natural inclination is to overestimate the event and underestimate the process. We wait for a special occasion or an intense experience to boost our growth instead of appreciating the process. In the words of my friend Kevin Myers: "Everyone is looking for a quick fix, but what they really need is fitness."

Growth is not automatic. Paul Harvey said it best: "You can tell you're on the road to success; it's uphill all the way." You can't coast uphill. Growth doesn't happen by itself; it requires an active investment of time.

His thoughts triggered a connection between my fitness training (a personal passion) and my endurance as a leader. Let me explain.

I do a lot of training for triathlon and some of my best workouts - the ones that pay the greatest dividends - are the hill workouts. They very frequently humble me (and sometimes even make me question my commitment), but they generate much greater strength, endurance, heart and commitment than other workouts that do not demand me to withstand continuous discomfort and sometimes outright pain.

When I connect my leadership challenges to hill workouts, I begin to see my leadership growth differently. I reflect on the times when I have felt discomfort and pain as a leader and how I have coped with it. Sometimes, I have given up before I even tried going up the leadership hill thinking it would just be too hard (I didn't even try to deal with the issue). Other times, I have steadily gone as far as I could before I gave into the discomfort or pain (I tried dealing with it, but as it got tougher and more complicated, I gave up before the issue was resolved). And then, there



have been times that I have persevered out of sheer will to not give up (I have worked through it until it came to some kind of resolution - I dealt with it).

Ironically, the greatest cost and the greatest return are the ones that I persevere through. It is not the gutting out of the climb that is so valuable, but the steadfastness to get through it, the courage to withstand the onslaught and the knowledge gained from going through it and making it to the other side of the climb. Finishing the entire climb reduces the fear, the unknown and the intimidating to knowable things and increases the confidence and acceptance which then opens the door for strategic thinking before the next climb of a same or a similar leadership hill. Just the realizations that 1) I am making these choices, 2) I am making it through some climbs, and that 3) the successful climbs are reinforcing a sense of the value in dealing with “leadership hill” challenges, all reinforce that it really is worth doing.

Earl Nightengale said, "If you'll spend one hour a day, every day for five years on a given subject, within five years you'll become an expert on that subject." This has certainly been true of my fitness training, and now, I realize it is also true of my development as a leader. The thing is, much like Maxwell suggests, my leadership development, like my triathlon training, has been happening over the years, day by day, hill challenge by hill challenge. And, while I have struggled to find significant meaning, understanding and a reason to continue – to have ‘a special occasion or an intense experience’ to boost my growth and see leadership progression – I find now, that it has been the process, ‘the journey’, that has brought me to this reflective place in my leadership development. It is the process that has made me stronger and more willing to engage in the tough climbs. And it is the process that has given me the confidence to continue to challenge the leadership hills and through these experiences to continue to develop into a deeper, richer and more complete leader.

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