

The Leadership Journey

Practical Tips to Help You Develop Your Leadership Abilities To Their Fullest



"Truly a must have for anyone looking to develop and grow as a leader."

— Alan Page

Jim Holmes

FOREWORD BY ROBERT C. MARTIN

The Leadership Journey

Practical tips on starting or changing your leadership journey

Jim Holmes

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/theleadershipjourney>

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Dedication

On January 10th, 2017 my bright, empathetic, loving 12 year old son woke up, got out of bed, and murdered my wife of 23 years, Pam Wolosz. He then attacked our 16 year old daughter who was badly injured, but survived. My 83 year old mother in law lives with us and was home during the attack, but physically unharmed. I was on the other side of the continent at the time for work and dropped everything to rush back home to try and begin piecing life back together.

I've been humbled by the amazing support from family, friends, and the broad software community I've been part of for many years. The outpouring of love has been tremendous, and the contributions through the [family's GoFundMe campaign](https://www.gofundme.com/jimholmes)¹ set up by friends have been humbling.

My wife had just begun final edits on this book, which I'd finally gotten to "draft complete" status after two years of love, sweat, and a lot of procrastination. The last e-mail I had from her was a list of feedback points for edits.

This book is dedicated to my wife Pam, and my daughter Lydia, two women who I've struggled with, laughed with, and greatly loved.

Lydia: You'll likely never read this, but I'm extraordinarily proud of you, your strength, and who you're growing in to. Even if I complain about you never picking up your room. I doubt you'll ever understand how much I love you.

Pam: I miss you terribly, but am grateful to have had such a wonderful life together. Thank you for everything you gave me.

¹<https://www.gofundme.com/jimholmes>



Pam during a hike in Italy's Südtirol region

Now there's tears on the pillow
Darling where we slept
You took my heart when you left
Without your sweet kiss my soul
Is lost my friend
Tell me how am I to carry on?
— Bruce Springsteen, *City of Ruins*

One Final Thing

Put down this book right now and go tell your loved ones you care. Life is short, life is precious, life is tenuous. Don't leave important things unsaid.

I mean it. Why are you still here reading? Go tell them. Now.

Preface: Why This Book?

Because too few people get good guidance on becoming a great leader.

What makes a bad leader? What makes a great leader? Do you care? Do you want to be one of the latter, and avoid the former?

The Bad

In June of 1916, the Allies of World War I were laying out an offensive, known as the Battle of the Somme, to push German troops out of an area in northern France. Preparations had taken a long time and a serious storm front moved into the area.

On July 1st the armies' commanders, miles behind the front lines, sent word for the attack to begin. Soldiers at the front had to cross a flooded river, then a swampy plain, followed by a mile of open terrain, and finally attack uphill into well-defended German positions.

Allied casualties were a staggering 60,000, with 20,000 dead, *on the first day*. The commanders later visited the front lines and were stunned to see what they'd ordered their troops cross.

The command officers were so far removed from their troops they had no idea about the horrific tactical situation. Sixty thousand allied soldiers were injured or killed in one single day as a result.

The Good

In stark contrast, front line leaders, often non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and junior officers (lieutenants and captains) were able

to get their troops out of their relatively safe trenches and cross that flooded river, swampy plain, open field, and stagger up that hill to attack despite the Germans being in a well-prepared defensible position.

Whom Is This Book For?

This book's targeted for people running small to mid-sized teams of two to fewer than 100. In my history of leadership roles, I've worked in groups where I've known everyone on my teams, generally fairly well.

Certainly many things from this book can scale up to larger organizations—leadership fundamentals are the same at any level. It's some of the implementation and communication things that are harder to accomplish at that size.

Which Teams Does This Book Focus On?

I'd like to think this book can help you lead teams of any type. I don't try to specialize for sports, software development, or community volunteer groups—I'm laying out ideas and approaches fundamental to any team.

This book is colored by my journey. My life experience comes from leadership roles in the military, sports teams, software development teams, and an all-volunteer team who built a conference for software professionals from 230 to 2,200 attendees eight years later.

That background is the source for much of my thinking, many of my values, and most of my been-there-done-that stories.

My hope is you'll find this book helpful regardless of what kind of team you're involved with!

Leadership Is a Journey

You're likely not in a work environment resembling the Battle of the Somme. I use that example because of its amazing dichotomy: What makes the first group of leaders so bad? What makes the second group so great they are able to motivate their troops despite the horrific violence raining down on them?

I've long felt great leaders aren't born that way. They grow into their greatness and so can you.

Are you interested in moving into a leadership role in your career? Are you already there and looking to improve your leadership skills?

If so, I hope you'll find a few things in this book to help you along your path.

My Goals for You

Why do I want you to read this book? What do I hope you'll get from investing your time?

I hope I can help you with a few fundamental things.

Decide if You Do Indeed Want to Become a Leader

You don't have to become a leader. Seriously. It's a choice and you have options. You do need to understand the consequences of your choices—some organizations may not allow you to remain a “worker bee” in which case you'll need to find another job if you feel strongly about it. You can make a choice to avoid taking up that role. Make it a conscious, informed choice, though!

If you decide to start a leadership journey (and I hope you do!), this book will help you along that path.

Know How to Become a Leader

There are a lot of ways to become a leader. Some of it depends on the organization you work with, some of it depends on your current managers and leaders, some of it depends on you.

In some organizations, leadership responsibilities are handed out simply based on time in position or overall seniority. Other organizations look for people with potential and mentor them. Still other organizations encourage interested employees to step up to the plate.

I can't do much with the first (time in position), but I hope to help you in the second and third environments.

Help You Feel Like You're a Successful Leader

Part of a leader's job is to radiate confidence, especially when things are tough. Impostor syndrome, stress, politics, time pressure, all of these can make it hard to feel you're doing your job well, much less being *seen* as effective!

One of my goals is to ensure you're able to feel like you're a successful leader—even when things are tough. I'll help you figure out how to play off your strengths, mitigate (and improve!) your weaknesses, ensure you're meeting your organization's mission, and ensure you understand, as clearly as possible, the expectations your leaders have of you.

Help You Understand How to Run an Awesome Team

Finally, I want to make sure you've got a few tools to ensure your team's running as smoothly as possible. Believe me, there's little more satisfying than watching your team self-organize to solve difficult problems, crush their work with great success, and have a fun time doing it.

A number of factors helps you guide your teams to awesomeness: Clearly set expectations, work hard to achieve great communication, grow your people's skills, and above all foster absolute respect among every team member.

Why Should You Become a Leader?

Why should you become a leader? It's a valid question, and one you shouldn't take lightly.

Let's get this clear: most people don't *have* to accept leadership roles. Sure, some folks have leadership responsibilities thrust upon them, but the majority of people can exercise their free will in deciding whether to move into, or accept, a position of leadership.

Deciding *not* to accept a leadership role may have consequences. You may limit your career progression options. You may get labeled as someone unwilling to take on more responsibility. You may end up working under someone promoted over you due to your decision to not accept the leadership role.

Let's have a look at some reasons why you should consider taking a leadership role.

Too Few Good Ones

Face it: there are too few good leaders in the world.

Look around you. How many people in politics, society, business, or your community do you consider leaders?

The harsh fact is there are too few great leaders in our world. Startups fail for a myriad of reasons; however, poor leadership is right up there on the top three list. Communities fail to provide opportunities, economic and otherwise, for their citizens because leaders aren't able to accomplish what they should. Organizations, large and small alike, struggle to survive because their leaders aren't

able to get their teams focused on the goals most critical to the needs of those organizations.

Let's just politely agree to avoid diving into the abject failure of many politicians as leaders, shall we?

We need leaders to mentor and guide their teams in the workplace so their companies are strong, stable, and provide an empowering, encouraging workplace. Those leaders aren't needed just in the board rooms, they're needed on the front lines in manufacturing. They're needed on farms and ranches in rural communities. They're desperately needed in troubled schools in so many different places across our world.

We need leaders in our communities to help find solutions to problems plaguing us at every turn: poor education, lack of economic opportunities, crime, you name it. We need leaders to step up to help organizations targeting our youth: Scouts, YesWeCode, Dream Corps, and so many more.

Why should you become a leader? *Because there is a desperate need for great leaders at every level!*

Career Advancement

Moving into leadership can help you move forward in your career. You can open up many more opportunities for additional roles, responsibilities, and salary increases.

Sometimes we're hesitant to clearly state "I want to advance my career." It can be perceived by others as selfish or narcissistic, and peers may look down on you for wanting to move up the ladder.

Of course history is full of "ladder climbers" who've moved up for all the wrong reasons: they've gained promotions more for their mastery of politics than ability; they've outright sabotaged others' chances; etc.

Don't let yourself get derailed because of bad things others have done. There's nothing wrong with wanting to move along your career path if you honestly care about making a difference and you want to advance to continue at a job or with an organization you like or love.

Many organizations aren't set up to support the advancement of workers who would rather stay focused on technology. Some software companies have the notion of a technically-focused career path advancing developers to tech leads to architects and so forth; however, these organizations are few and far between. Most organizations expect workers to move up into spots where they're responsible for overseeing some form of integrated, multi-functional team unit.

Other organizations enable their workers to move into positions with more responsibility to help the organization to succeed. Furthermore, most organizations *need* workers to move up and help the organization grow its success. That upward migration opens new doors for opportunity.

Why should you become a leader? *Because you're opening up new opportunities for YOU to excel at!*

Filling a Gap

Organizations change. People move on, up, or away, leaving their work unfilled. The mission evolves, and new tasks need to be done. Sometimes external forces cause change (curse those customers/users/whomever!) which an organization may be slow to address.

Large gaps such as a new line of business, a new group/division, or a new product, are generally easy to detect. Smaller gaps like the need for a build/Continuous Integration server, changes to support processes, or a customer who needs more attention might not be noticed—or they may fall far down management's priority stack.

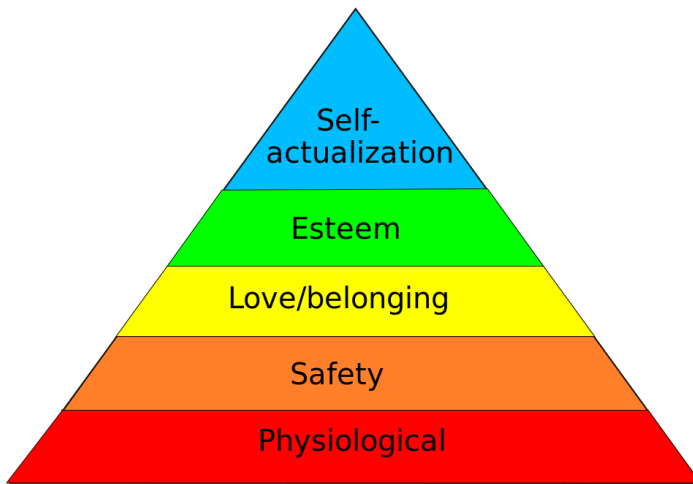
These gaps have to be filled or the organization won't be as successful as it could be. Maybe it's a gap that's close to home: something that's impacting you or your current team directly. You might have ideas on how to address that gap, but you can't do anything about it unless you take responsibility for getting it done.

Why should you become a leader? *Because you want to fill a gap to make the organization and/or yourself more successful.*

Self-Fulfillment

Despite many challenges in our world that give me pause, I remain entrenched in my belief that at our core we humans want to better ourselves and the lives of those around us. Self-actualization crowns Maslow's hierarchy of needs² for a good reason: people have an innate desire to reach their full potential at something that matters.

²http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In later years Maslow evolved his theories to add other goals outside oneself, such as altruism and spirituality.

You don't have to buy off on Maslow's ideas, but I contend we all have something inside us that wants to excel; we just need to figure out what we care to excel at, and we need to find or create an environment where we can excel. Working hard at something, overcoming the challenges along the way, and finally seeing success is a tremendously satisfying journey.

You don't need to shoot for the moon³ all the time. Sure, a big challenge brings a huge sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, but smaller projects or opportunities themselves can be extremely rewarding.

Maybe you've a desire to help children get pointed in the right direction; Scouting is one place you can achieve that desire.

³*Shoot for the moon* means setting goals that are risky, but with a high payoff for success. The USA's missions to the moon were extraordinarily risky endeavors. They were carefully planned, engineered, and rehearsed, but lives were still lost.

Perhaps your team at work is having trouble communicating among themselves; take initiative and start a daily standup meeting to help them better communicate.

Maybe your team at the local ice cream shop is having problems getting milk shake wastage under control.⁴ Start a fun contest to see who can have the least wastage at the end of a shift.

Satisfaction from these efforts is cumulative over time. It builds up, and it builds momentum as well.

Why should you become a leader? *Because you want to improve yourself, and you want to feel pride in the achievements and successes you create.*

Exercise: *Why* Should You Become a Leader?

Goal

Help you focus on what your goals are. The *why* of something is a powerful context; focusing on what's driving you will help you clarify your goals.

Steps

1. Set a timebox⁵ of two minutes.
2. Think hard about two things that are driving your interest in becoming a leader. Examine those reasons and make sure they are your top two.
3. Write down those reasons.

⁴ *Wastage* is the term for excess goods beyond what you give the customer, such as the leftovers in the shake machine after you've filled the customers' shake cups. Wastage of all types hits shops right in the pocketbook!

⁵ A timebox is a set amount of time for a task. You "box" the task by constraining your work to a specific period of time. This helps you avoid wandering off in to ineffective efforts.

4. Stop your timer and take a short break.

Review

When you return from your break, re-evaluate the two reasons you wrote down. Are they clear enough? Do they still feel like your top two reasons? Do they align with the things you care about?

Edit, refactor, rewrite your two reasons as needed.

Takeaway

At this point you should feel like you've got two clear reasons fueling your motivation for moving into, or improving your ability at, a leadership role. If not, take some time to think things over. It's OK to have some doubt or uncertainty at this point, but try to rein that in and clarify things.

Taking Care of You

Take a moment and think on this: We're trying to get our teams to lead lives that are calm, focused, productive, and highly rewarding. How can you lead others if your own life is a mess?

Taking care of yourself is critical, even in the most stressful of times. Think about airline preflight safety briefs. Flight attendants emphasize putting your own oxygen mask on before helping those around.

Same thing for leadership, folks!

Time Management

I've talked about time management at several points in this book. I can't emphasize how critical a skill it is for you to master! There are a great many different time management philosophies, frameworks, and toolsets.

In my opinion picking the right approach is less important than getting started with one and being disciplined about it—and adapting it to your own personal needs.

Over the years I've used a number of approaches. My own (current!) top three list includes bits and pieces of the following:

- [Personal Kanban](http://www.personalkanban.com/pk/)⁶
- [Pomodoro Technique](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique)⁷
- [Todoist](https://en.todoist.com/)⁸

⁶<http://www.personalkanban.com/pk/>

⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique

⁸<https://en.todoist.com/>

Do any of these things—do something else. But by all means, *start doing something!*

Find a Mentor—For Yourself

I spend a significant amount of time mentoring others, both traditional subordinates from work as well as people I've run across in community activities. Mentoring is one of the most powerful, fulfilling things you can do.

It's also something you need to set up for your own growth!

Figure out areas you want to raise up your game in. Is it soft skills like emotional intelligence and facilitation? What about your work's technical domains?

Finding a mentor when you're further along in your career can be hard. (Ask me how I know...) Regardless, you need to make that effort!

Something that's worked for me over the last several years is having more than one mentor. I can't find that "one person" who can help me in all the areas I'm looking for help on.

Instead, I've formed relationships with a number of people who I look to for guidance in specific areas. I've got someone I confer with on testing-related issues. I have someone else I look to for wisdom and guidance on the strategic business domain. I've got a wonderful person I get help on my soft skills from.

Mentors are different than influencers and people you respect. The latter two categories are important, but a mentor is someone you need a specific sort of relationship with. You need to be *accountable* to your mentor.

The Final, Most Important Thing: Work Life Balance

Somewhere around 2013 I found myself drowning. Not literally, but figuratively drowning in my commitments. I was running a local software development user group, I was President of the Board of Directors for a conference drawing 2,500 attendees and hundreds of family members. I spoke at a large number of conferences, user groups, and meet ups. I was doing a significant amount of software and testing projects outside of my normal work. I was flying 140,000 miles per year to travel for my work, and spending at least 50-60 hours a week for that job. I was Cubmaster for my son's Cub Scout pack, and I had a few other things I was responsible for as well.

It may not be surprising, but I wasn't serving folks I was leading well, nor was I serving those in the communities I interacted with well. I was also poorly managing my type 1 diabetes.

Worst of all, I had a family I wasn't spending enough time with, especially a young daughter who badly needed her father to not be an angry, tired jackass all the time.

I managed to get a handle on things in time to head off any horrible explosions or epic failures, but just barely.

Take a step back and look at how satisfied you are with your entire life. Not just how well you're succeeding at work, but how you are doing *as a human*. Are you happy with your balance? If so, great. If not, work to figure out what's important and what's not. Get rid of the latter, prioritize the former.

Your teams will be happier with you, your loved ones will be happier with you, and best of all *you'll* be happier with you.

Need Help?

Do you or your organization need help with growing your leaders? Maybe I can help.

I've had a couple decades' experience working to make teams highly effective at what they do. Sure, I've had some failures. Anyone who says otherwise is selling snake oil. That said, I've led and worked with teams from three people in cubicle land to large teams distributed across continents and time zones.

I'd love to talk to you if you're looking to improve how you and your organization grow your leaders.

Please feel free to reach out to me at Jim@GuidepostSystems.com⁹. I may not be the right guy, but then again, I just might be.

⁹ <mailto:jim@guidepostsystems.com>