

The Accidental Leader

Are you selling your leadership journey short?



Optimum Insights, Inc.

Though still a few months shy of 40, Paul was more than a rising star at work. In many ways, he'd already arrived. As senior vice president of sales at a major pharmaceutical company, he earned more than \$200,000 a year and directed a team of 75 people. His bosses expected even greater things from him. In fact, they had sent Paul to a leadership training program to groom him for another promotion. When he sat down with an executive coach a few days into the program, he pulled out a photo of his wife and two young children at their vacation house on a lake. "I know it looks like I really have my act together," he told the coach. There was just one problem: he felt like things were falling apart.

His company had just acquired a rival, and a few of his colleagues in senior management had decided to leave. Paul was asked to pick up some of their key projects. It was actually the second merger in four years, and Paul was still coming to grips with the bigger workload created by the first one. Increasingly, he felt overwhelmed by his duties. He was angry about spending less and less time with his family. The day-to-day work of managing his team frustrated him more than ever.

Paul's problem has a name: drift. And it happens to most leaders at some point in their careers. When leaders start to drift, they stop making their own choices and get tugged along by events instead. They struggle to take action with a clear sense of purpose and connection to their values and goals. Paul, it turned out, had even drifted into his senior leadership role without pausing to think about how or why he wanted to lead. He'd been a great salesman. His reward: taking charge of other salespeople. His influence grew at the office and so did his salary. More promotions followed. He'd drifted to the top without making a conscious choice about leadership. Now the bill was coming due for this accidental leader.

Many talented and well-meaning leaders find themselves in Paul's shoes as business and the demands of leadership grow more global, more complex and more relentless. The good news: the cycle of drift can be broken. The caveat: it's not for the faint of heart. Discovering the leader in you calls for deep introspection about what matters most to you and what you want your legacy to be. It also demands that you seek out and act on feedback from colleagues and friends.

The sooner you start, the better. The more systematically you proceed, the greater your results will be. A serious self-assessment of your journey as a leader starts with thoughtfully exploring the following five areas:

Global Context . . .

What are some major factors in the broader world (i.e., the recent global recession) and inside your organization that impact you directly as a leader? Understanding this context and bigger picture helps you grasp the leadership demands you face on a daily basis.

Vision . . .

What is the overall purpose of your life? What do you want to accomplish? Being purposeful about what you want in life relates directly to your goals as a leader. Without a clear personal vision, you will have a hard time evaluating the opportunities and challenges you encounter as a leader – and others will be reluctant to follow.

Values . . .

What values are most important to you? What are your deepest passions? Ultimately, they drive your behavior. It's critical to know your values and understand how to express them in your choices and actions as a leader.

Leadership Portfolio . . .

What are the personal qualities that define you as a leader? What is your distinctive style? Whether you're conscious of it or not, your leadership portfolio is the toolkit that you draw on to lead. It includes your philosophy of leadership and your strengths and weaknesses as a leader.

Personal Context . . .

How in synch is your life overall? Whether you are in the office, at home or on vacation, you are still just one person. But we often spend too much time compartmentalizing. In fact, your lives at work and away from it can be mutually supportive and provide many opportunities to bring out the best in yourself and those around you.

No one's leadership journey is exactly the same as anyone else's – and there aren't any right or wrong answers to the questions posed in this article. But if you find yourself in a state of drift – and you are far from alone in that regard – what matters is the effort you make to better understand and finally embrace your identity as a leader. When you find your point of deep purpose, it will keep you anchored during good times and bad.

Sara N. King, a former executive at the top-ranked, nonprofit Center for Creative Leadership, is founder of Optimum Insights, Inc. a leadership coaching and consulting firm.
www.optimuminsights.com

