

CHAPTER ONE

HOW MUCH CAN WE HOPE FOR?

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

— CHARLES DARWIN¹

Helen's boss, Peter, has just informed her that her unit is going to be eliminated and that, while she and some of her employees will be offered jobs elsewhere in the company (and possibly elsewhere in the country), she will have to lay off the rest of her team. What's more, Peter doesn't want her to let anyone know yet because the company needs her team to finish its current project ahead of schedule. Peter has always looked out for Helen, and now he says he is counting on her to manage this with as little damage to the company as possible. "We're in enough trouble as it is," he confides, "or I wouldn't be asking you to do this." He doesn't say what the trouble is.

We can imagine that Helen has many conflicting motives. She wants to do her best for the company, or at least to live up to Peter's expectations and to repay his past generosity. She wants to come out of this looking good, to protect her own career. There are a few of her people she could afford to be rid of, but she is anxious to be fair. She'd very much like to know what has made this layoff necessary, but she is reluctant to ask Peter for more information than he chose to give. She doesn't feel right keeping the impending layoff secret from her team, yet she thinks that if

she lets the cat out of the bag now, it would be very difficult to finish the current project, never mind speeding it up. Not that her team would deliberately sabotage the project, but keeping them extra motivated while waiting to be laid off would take some very skillful management on her part, and she's not sure she's up to that.

Clearly, some of her impulses are contradictory. She can't let people know *and* keep it a secret at the same time—but there are good reasons for both. She can't lay off a long-time-but-not-very-useful employee *and* keep a new-but-harder-working employee while appearing completely fair—but there are good reasons for both. It ought to be a mental train wreck, and yet somehow she will come to a decision of an acceptable course of action. She will not go crazy. Her head will not explode.

GOOD LEADERSHIP IS A NATURAL HUMAN BEHAVIOR

The poet John Donne noted that many everyday occurrences would seem miraculous if they happened only once.² I think we can look at Helen's eventual decision as just such an occurrence. Forming a decision out of such a tangle of motivations would seem miraculous if it weren't something we all do regularly. In this book we will examine what makes human beings capable of this everyday miracle of leadership and how we can all make better and more consistent use of it.

If we saw a cow flying through the air, we would wonder how the cow did it. We don't usually wonder how a bird does it; we know a bird is designed to fly. What I want to show you in this book is that human beings are designed to feel simultaneous conflicting motivations and to arrive at an acceptable decision—not *in spite of* the conflicting motivations but *because of* them. It is the very tangle of Helen's motivations, we might say, that will enable her to solve them satisfactorily.

How can that be? All living things react to certain aspects of their environments, but no living thing can react in as many different ways to as many things as a human being can. There are several reasons for this, but the most important is the fact that

more things strike us as *significant* or worth reacting to. You might say that more things can push our buttons because we have more buttons to push. Four, to be precise—the four basic drives that I will discuss fully in Chapter Two. Other animals have a basic drive to get what they need—food, shelter, a mate, and so on—and a basic drive to defend themselves against whatever threats they can recognize. Humans of course have these two drives, but we have two others equally important to us—a basic drive to bond, to trust and care for others and to be trusted and cared for by others, and a basic drive to make some sense of our lives. While these two drives sound “fuzzier” than the other two, we will see in the next chapter that they are just as real. It is because we have four drives—four buttons to be pushed—rather than two that we are so much more responsive to our environment. As far as we know, no other creature could have so many different and conflicting things on its mind as Helen has on her mind in the story after hearing Peter’s request.

But how does this responsiveness result in decisions and leadership rather than confusion and stalemate? It happens because our brains have evolved a way to let all four drives “have their say” and then to use our knowledge and experience to arrive at a solution that is acceptable to all four. This is not a metaphor; this is really what happens in the brain, as we will see in Chapter Two. And it is the need to accommodate such a variety of motivations—Helen’s predicament—that brings forth such a variety of responses. To put it crudely, for most creatures, the only problems are to feed and mate and to fight or flee enemies. There are only so many ways they can do those few things, amazing as some of those ways may seem to us. (We are amazed that a spider can make a web, but that’s about the only thing a spider can make.) Helen, though, has so many different impulses to take into account—so many more things that matter to her—that her solution cannot be the same thing that has already been done a million times.

She cannot just spin another web. She has to come up with a unique solution to an immediate situation. That is what humans are uniquely able to do, and that is a pretty good description of leadership. It is obvious from everyday life and from history that

this decision-making process is not perfect, but it is also obvious from everyday life and from history that it does work pretty well much of the time.

Often our motivations are conflicting because various people are involved who have different—even conflicting—needs and desires. (This is what Helen faces—the needs and desires of her team differ from the needs and desires of Peter and his superiors; her own needs and desires are yet another variable.) But human beings are designed to take other people’s differing and conflicting needs and desires into account.

In short, we are designed to accomplish things in groups—to lead and follow (which, we will see, are not simple opposites), to learn from each other, to trust and protect and care for each other, to acquire what we need collectively even if we then enjoy it individually. We have evolved this way because it turned out to be a very successful means of survival.

And it still is. In the 1990s and early 2000s, a surprising transformation took place on two offshore oil rigs. Thanks to a deliberate management effort, an extremely macho culture that rewarded intimidation, recklessness, and a cocksure attitude, even when this resulted in injuries and deaths (not to mention inefficient oil drilling), changed into a culture in which these same tough men took their own and each other’s safety seriously, asked for and accepted help from each other, and would even admit out loud in front of visiting women professors that they were afraid or unsure. As one worker put it, “We went from living in one world to living in a good world.”³ Meanwhile, the drilling was accomplished more efficiently and more profitably.

Here, leadership took the role formerly played by evolution. In fact, leadership has become our primary means of *adapting* to changing circumstances, which Darwin cited earlier as the key to our survival. Since circumstances are always changing, we all have to lead ourselves. In addition, many of us lead others or would like to. This is not a glib comparison; we will see in Part One that the leadership most fit for a group is an extension of the self-leadership that is built into a normal individual’s brain. And as we will see in detail in Chapter Four, this was exactly the kind of leadership that altered the crews of the oil rigs.

IS BAD LEADERSHIP PART OF THE HUMAN CONDITION?

This book about good leadership will have a lot to say about bad leadership. Because humans survive and accomplish things in groups, and because groups always have leaders (often multiple leaders), a bad leader is a serious problem. Although bad leadership has always plagued mankind, we seem particularly aware now of political, business, and organizational failures all over the world—the financial meltdown on Wall Street, Bernie Madoff, the tolerance of child abuse in religious institutions, Osama bin Laden, the awful governments of Zimbabwe, North Korea, Sudan, Burma, and so on. Not only do we know much more about what leaders do and how they fail than would have been possible in previous times, we also expect better of them—a legacy of the Enlightenment. That is why it is so frustrating to see these bad leaders causing so much pain and suffering in so many people’s lives.

Many people are understandably skeptical that leadership as a whole can be improved. Although it has been studied and written about for centuries, has there been any improvement in leadership comparable to the improvements in our material well-being brought about by science, engineering, and medicine? You may expect me to say “no,” but actually my answer is, “Yes, but the advancements are too easily reversed.” The U.S. Constitution, for example, can be seen as a social technology that has been as beneficial since its invention as inoculation or the electric light. (This is discussed at length in Chapter Five.) But we have not been able to nail down our advancements in leadership so that they stay put, the way the advances made by Edison or Jenner seem irreversible. There are always big steps backward.

Is bad leadership an inescapable part of the human condition? My response is that once we understand what makes for good leadership, we can see that the *potential* for bad leadership is indeed part of the human condition, but not the necessity of enduring it. Consider pneumonia: it used to be a deadly disease, but today it is rare for anyone in the developed world to die of pneumonia unless he or she is already weakened by age or chronic illness. Our “human condition” has not changed; we

have the same potential to die of pneumonia as ever. But it is no longer necessary for us to die of pneumonia because we finally understand it and know what to do about it. I think we are now on the verge of understanding bad leadership and what to do about it.

LEADERSHIP IS DECISION MAKING, AND WE ARE DECISION MAKERS

Leadership is always associated with action. But to understand leadership and to practice better leadership, we will need to take a closer look at inaction. Think of all the things we don't do—all the things we want but don't buy (or steal), all the things we think but don't say, all the people we don't like but don't attack, all the choices we consider but don't take.

One way of looking at this is that, more than any other species, human beings are decision makers. Other animals make choices, but they do not choose from the infinite possibilities from which humans must choose. (At least, we don't see the variety in animal activity that we see in human activity.) How is it that, in any particular circumstance, we are capable of so many different responses and yet manage to choose one—usually a workable one? It is possible because we make our decisions in a unique way. We are certainly not the machines of “rational self-interest” that leading economic theories imagine we are (which should be obvious by the frequency with which we undermine ourselves). But there is a logic at work. While in some ways it is non-negotiable, it is fantastically flexible. As I said earlier, it is designed to arrive at good decisions because of—not in spite of—conflicting motivations. The process is certainly not foolproof, but it is well-designed for self-correction and improvement.

This decision-making process—so familiar yet so surprising when we really examine it—is the basis of good self-leadership and good leadership of groups. We will learn about it in Part One; that will be the first step in learning to lead with your whole brain.

This book is organized into three parts:

Part One, “The Leadership Brain,” presents the biological underpinnings of leadership behavior.

Part Two discusses the history of leadership, examining critical turning points in the leadership of political institutions; the rise of corporations as the leading economic institution; and the leadership of religious, artistic, and scientific institutions.

Part Three focuses on modern (mostly twentieth-century) political and economic leadership. Chapter Eight is concerned with contemporary corporate leadership, including the contrasting leadership styles of firms such as Enron and Medtronic. Chapter Nine extends that discussion to the crisis of the 2007–2009 subprime mortgage financial meltdown. Chapter Ten moves to contemporary issues of multinational corporations and world-level political institutions. Chapter Eleven discusses the practice of good/moral leadership and ends with ideas for action on the high-priority issues of our time. Chapter Twelve provides a fresh look at the age-old question of the meaning of human life and the question of human progress.