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Here is your moment of truth. We know with certainty that leadership can be learned. We know, without a doubt, that buyers want sellers to demonstrate leadership. The remaining gap is yours to fill. Not everyone wants to learn, and not all who learn about leadership commit fully and master it. Why? Because becoming the very best requires a strong belief that you can learn and grow, an intense aspiration to excel, the determination to challenge yourself constantly, the recognition that you must engage the support of others, and the devotion to practice deliberately. Learning leadership is an ongoing quest, not one with a finish line.

Leadership, like selling, is often misunderstood. Some believe that you must be a “natural born” leader or seller to succeed. They attribute the success of exemplary leaders and sellers to inborn personality characteristics. They self-select themselves out of leadership or sales because they mistakenly believe they don’t have the charisma, charm, abilities, or perseverance required to excel. Research debunks and refutes these notions. If you want to become exemplary in any field, you have to train hard and put in extra effort to practice and hone your skills. This is true in sales. It’s also true in leadership. As the old saying goes: *Hard work beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard*. Florida State University professor and noted authority on expertise K. Anders Ericsson made this same point when he said:

Until most individuals recognize that sustained training and effort is a prerequisite for reaching expert levels of performance, they will continue to misattribute lesser achievement to the lack of natural gifts, and will thus fail to reach their own potential.

Decades of research reveal that raw talent is not all there is to becoming a top performer. “One of the first things you learn when you study achievement for a living,” says Heidi Grant Halvorson, associate director of the Motivation Science Center at Columbia University, “is that innate ability (to the extent there is such a thing) tells you nothing about your chances of reaching a goal.” Talent is not the key that unlocks excellence.

In sales, top performers aren’t necessarily the ones with the highest IQs or the most experience. In fact, experience can be a barrier to performance if you are trapped in old ways of doing things. Being the best, in any field, requires deliberate practice. Practicing *deliberately* doesn’t mean you engage

in selling activities and leadership behaviors as they present themselves to you. Instead, you engage in experiences designed specifically to improve performance. "Designed" is the key idea, meaning there's a methodology and a specific goal involved. Second, practice is not a one-time event. It's not limited to the occasional role play in sales training or to four-legged coaching calls with your sales manager. Engaging in a designed learning experience is something you must do over and over again, until the behavior you're learning becomes automatic. That takes hours of repetition.

Deliberate practice also involves getting feedback. You won't know how well you're doing if you don't have a coach, mentor, manager, colleague, or buyer analyzing and evaluating your performance. When you're mastering a new skill or developing a new habit, it's virtually impossible to assess your own performance.

Deliberate practice isn't much fun. What keeps top performers going during grueling practice sessions is not their enjoyment of that activity, but the knowledge that they are improving and getting closer to their dream of superior performance when it counts.

Last but not least, practice takes time. The more you practice selling skills, the better you become in demonstrating expertise with each skill you've honed. Leadership is no different. To become an exemplary leader, make learning leadership a daily habit. You must commit to practicing leadership with buyers in every encounter. You have to make choices to lead your internal partners. To lead, you must engage in leadership behaviors more often.

You won't ever be 100 percent perfect, and certainly not on day one. That's okay. Buyers in our research rated the frequency of behaviors, not their quality. They just want to see sellers utilizing leadership behaviors more often. With dedicated practice on your leadership, quality will naturally develop. Don't wait until you've mastered a leadership practice before you demonstrate it to your buyers. Instead, practice every day with your buyers. They will notice and respond favorably to the behaviors themselves and in this way you will be differentiated from other sellers.

As you step into your role as a leader with your buyers, there's one more thing to work on. It's a big one. *You must also lead yourself.*

The instrument of leadership is the self. Mastery of the art of leadership comes from mastery of the self. Engineers have computers, painters have canvas and brushes, musicians have instruments, and sellers have products and services. Leaders have only themselves. Becoming the best leader you

can be means becoming the best self you can be. Therefore, leadership development is fundamentally self-development.

Self-development makes you more than a seller with a product to sell. It gives you confidence in you -- and this confidence is infectious, making buyers believe in you. The better you know yourself, the better you can make sense of the often incomprehensible and conflicting messages you receive daily. Sell this, sell that. Pitch this, pitch that. Change this, change that. You need internal guidance to navigate the turmoil in today's highly uncertain environment. The internal compass you need comes from understanding yourself and what you value, why you value it, and what actions you can take to back up what you believe. From this self-development comes self-assuredness and, in turn, an ability to inspire others. The confidence that others have in you gives you the latitude to challenge your buyers' status quo. It makes it possible for you to support buyers in ways that allow them to participate in creating what they want.

Learning about yourself and about leadership gives you a strong start. But deciding to be an exemplary leader is not the same as *being* one. Leading is *doing*. It's making behavioral choices in everything you do. You need to do something every day to learn more about leading, and you need to put those lessons into practice daily.

Leadership happens in the moment. There are many moments with buyers each day when you can choose to lead. In those interactions you can choose to do small things that will make a difference. Each day you can choose to lead by your example. Each day you can choose to lift the spirits of your buyers. Each day you can choose to find exciting opportunities for your buyers. Each day you can choose to strengthen the relationships you have with your buyers. Each day you can choose to say "thank you" more often.

Start leading. The more frequently you choose to lead, the more you will create those awesome connecting experiences that make extraordinary things happen.

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For more information about their new book *Stop Selling and Start Leading*, please visit <http://stopsellingstartleading.com>