

CHAPTER 1

VALIDATION

Give your difference, welcome my difference, unify all differences in the larger whole—such is the law of growth. The unifying of difference is the eternal process of life—the creative synthesis, the highest act of creation.

Mary Parker Follett

I was just starting a new position charged with developing a center at the University of Washington’s Foster School of Business. In my first month on the job, I was asked to coordinate a session titled Leaders to Legends, to which we invited alumni and business leaders to attend a luncheon to hear about new developments in leadership. The leader who was speaking was a senior vice president of marketing at Starbucks. She and I had agreed to set up the session where I would lead off with some comments about the goals of the session, and then we would talk about her life stream of events that had brought her to her current position in life and at work. Just prior to the session commencing, I asked her to tell me about a trigger moment in her life or career that had shaped her views of herself as a leader. Over the past decade, I have asked many leaders the same question, usually adding a positive trigger event. She looked at me and within a minute or two said, “Got it.”

When we started the session and got to that point, she told the story that went back to when she had just started working at Starbucks. She had a meeting with the then-CEO of Starbucks. She indicated that he called her into his office and proceeded to tell her all of the leadership qualities he saw in her that needed to be nurtured, and he wanted to take on the responsibility of helping her rise in the Starbucks’ leadership hierarchy. She was quite stunned at his remarks but left his office feeling (as she said, for the first time) *validated* as a leader. I think she would later add “initially validated.”

If I asked you to think about someone in your life who triggered in you such validation, would you have someone in mind? Usually people do, especially when

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they have been fortunate enough to have key individuals who recognized in them something they did not recognize in themselves. In fact, it is almost a principle or law of leadership development that when people talk about feeling validated in their leadership, they typically add, “And you know, I didn’t see that in myself.” Why? Because it is at the foundation of where we might say leadership development and personal development emerges. It is called self-awareness.

Now, what is actually being validated? It appears it is one of the selves that make up who we are as individuals. Yes, I did mean *selves* as is, in plural. For instance, in the example above, we could say it is the *leader self* or self-image that was validated by the CEO in that early career meeting. However, beyond the part that makes up who she is, there is also a *parent self*, a *peer self*, and a *community citizen self-concept*. What we are learning is that there are multiple selves that make up the composite of who we are and more importantly who we are becoming. Validating one of those selves provides assurance that we are becoming whatever roles go along with that self. Thinking about multiple selves also helps us unpack what constitutes one’s self-awareness. Specifically, we have to ask, which self in the larger or total *self* are we referring to in terms of validation?

The sort of validation that occurred above with a senior leader can also occur with peers, followers, individuals we know outside our organizational lives, and even our own natural learning from events. In terms of learning from events, the idea that leadership development occurs through natural learning processes is something that is gathering steam in organizations around the globe. What I mean by *natural learning* is deriving messages, learning, and validation from events you live through at work or outside of work—typically unplanned. For example, a number of authors talk about the work and life challenges that shape leadership development as being events like assuming a new position, taking on a transition in roles, working in a different culture, managing significant change, and dealing with a major new initiative. You will notice that I did not mention traditional training or in-classroom development.

Interestingly enough, the evidence we have now collected certainly supports short training interventions which can have a positive impact on leader development. Indeed, when my colleagues and I went back to review the past 100 years of research referred to in Box 0.1, we found that even a few hours of training could have a positive impact on one’s leadership development. However, most would now agree that the big bang for the buck is taking advantage of real challenges to facilitate leadership development. The real challenges are what I referred to above as natural learning events.^{8,9}

It may be helpful to further examine what is meant by natural learning. Have you had a challenge in your work or a significant transition in life over the past 3 months? For me, the transition challenge was moving from Omaha, Nebraska,

to Seattle, Washington, going from a maturing leadership center to building a brand-new one. As I looked forward at this transition, I thought in advance of what I hoped to accomplish, what the school needed, who my stakeholders were, how I would resource the center, where I would start on boarding others, and so forth. I was self-aware enough to see the new position as not only a job, but also a leadership transition challenge for myself. This level of leader self-awareness came about as this was my third center start-up, so I was much more aware of what a center was and what my role would be in building the new center, including having to be one of its leaders. These reflections even led me to pick my personal leadership goal: to assume positive intent in others. I chose this goal, as I thought it was the best way to onboard others and to accelerate our center's development. This goal can be sourced to the work I have been engaged in over the past 7 years examining how leader positivity, or what Fred Luthans has called *psychological capital*, predicts motivation and performance. My goal was to see if leaders' positivity could trump plowing forward to get what I wanted done. I have some more to say on this later.

So if you have had a role transition, what did it mean for yourself as a leader? How did it challenge what you knew? How did it challenge what you needed to know? How have you done so far in addressing the transition? Have you learned anything about your leadership that has challenged you to think about areas you need to develop? If so, what are those areas? Maybe you have been luckier than I, and in addressing your challenge you have been validated? Transitions are really fertile events for naturally promoting leadership development, especially if you are mindful of how the event may be used to foster your development.¹⁰

In order to take advantage of transitions or natural learning challenges, you must be mindful of three things: First, your current leader self—What makes you effective, and what might hinder your ability to succeed in this new transition? Second, the possible leader self you want to become—How might you change how you think about leadership, how you act in your role as leader or follower, and how you use the means available to lead in this new transition? Third, your goal regarding your leader self—What is the end goal of what you want to achieve as a leader in order to maintain the positive energy to stay the course? Have you considered these three issues with the last transition or challenge you went through at work or outside of work? If so, how have you evolved as a leader? What did you learn? By the way, you can ask these questions and use the reference of follower, peer, or even parent.

You might be taking from my comments above, that one does not just become validated and can say, "Been there and done that." In fact, as we go through the challenges we confront in life, as leaders, we must continually go through revalidation. What is interesting is that is also true of things in science that we say are

validated. For example, you can validate a measure of leadership in 100 different samples around the globe. Yet, it is not appropriate to say you have a *valid measure of leadership*. Why? In the 101st sample, the measure may not predict what it was designed to predict, and thus we would consider that measure invalid for that sample, although the probability of that happening is not high.

Each time we move to a different level of understanding ourselves, truly understanding ourselves, we can say we have gone through another stage of validation. It is when we are not mindful of this validation process that we tend to lose perspective on who we are, who we are becoming, and what we can do. There are many leaders we might describe as not being in touch with his or her leader self. In some instances, the individual has so little confidence in his leadership he simply cannot see himself as being validated. I am not saying the individual cannot be validated, but he may not be ready to be validated, a concept I will take up later in this book.

At the other extreme are my “favorite” leaders, the ones who have too much hubris to be concerned about validation. Why should anyone have to validate them, or they themselves? They are born to be leaders. These types of leaders can be very surprised when their self-ratings of leadership do not match those of their followers when completing 360 surveys. The ratings they give to themselves are oftentimes way over what others have seen in their leadership. This gap in and of itself may be a wake-up call for prompting some individuals to do further reflection on their leadership. It may also lead them to reject what others have to say, moving them forward without passing the validation checkpoint.

So let us turn these events into a developmental lesson. Validation will occur or not occur to some degree regardless of what you chose to do in terms of your leadership development. What I mean is that serendipity may have its way, and events may come along or not that can shape your development leading to validation. However, you can also stack the deck in favor of further validation by using two strategies. First, be mindful that life and work both trigger events regardless of what you do. The more mindful you are of their potential, the less likely you will miss them passing by in your life stream.

Second, you can choose different life streams to explore what will increase the probability of a trigger event occurring that has some potential validation attached to the event. I have personally found that moving three times over the past 7 years has triggered a number of events associated with our living and career transitions that has shaped my development. Consequently, as the literature might suggest, taking on challenging new assignments, living abroad, and trying to change the way you impact others can each trigger your development, again, if you are mindful of the possibilities. Thus, it is not just the event, but your readiness to learn from the event that potentially triggers development.

Do you have a trigger moment that you can identify that led to some form of validation for you? What was the situation? Who was the source? How did it impact the way you lead?

BOX 1.1 Trigger Moments and Validation

A total of 74 interviews between 2006 and 2007 were conducted with top CEOs from Singapore, Bangalore, Hong Kong, Mumbai, Shanghai, and Beijing. We completed a minimum of 9 interviews and a maximum of 23 from top management leaders from the respective cities noted above to examine how their leadership developed (23, 12, 9, 10, 11, and 9, respectively). Interviews were conducted one-on-one, going through a list of standardized questions used for all interviewees. Interviews in Singapore and Bangalore were conducted face-to-face, while interviews in Beijing were primarily conducted by phone. The CEOs interviewed tended to believe that leadership was both made and born/heritable, as I have found in similar samples in the United States and elsewhere around the globe. Most of the Asian leaders said they never planned to be in such a prominent leadership role, which led me to label them *accidental leaders*. The three most common responses to why they ended up in leadership roles were either because it “just happened” (accidental) in terms of right place/right time; they were simply seeking to do well in their current position and, as a result, increasingly had leadership opportunities presented to them (incremental); or they had a desire to have an impact through being a leader (impact). Many of the CEOs said their most important leadership development experiences occurred outside of formal educational/training. Their comments coincided with earlier work reviewed by Avolio (2005) that revealed exemplary leadership as typically developed in natural learning contexts such as one’s home, school, or workplace.

SOME THINGS WORTH REPEATING AND REFLECTING ON

To recap, one of the fundamental processes that fuels leadership development is being validated. Validation typically occurs when another respected individual sees in you something you do not yet recognize in yourself. Over time, as you gain experience via development, self-validation is certainly possible.

Natural learning events shape the course of our development, and the more developmentally ready we are to address, the higher the likelihood that we will extract out the type of meaning from those events that can accelerate our leadership development.

A SHORT EXERCISE

At the end of each chapter, there will be one short exercise that will take no longer than 5 minutes to do.

Think back now over the past 3 months and identify any situation where you felt you were validated as a leader.

- What did the individual or individuals do to help you feel you had been validated?
- What impact did such validation have on your model of leadership, your behavior, and your treatment of others?
- When is the last time you validated someone, and how did you do that?