



“An indispensable guide for leaders at every level”

—Bill Gates

John L. Hennessy

LEADING
MATTERS

Lessons from My Journey

Foreword by

WALTER ISAACSON



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*To Andrea,
my life partner for the past forty-eight years
and my companion on these journeys*

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FOREWORD

Walter Isaacson

The biggest regret you will feel when finishing this book is that you didn't read it earlier. All of us who have struggled to be good leaders would have found our way more easily if our paths had been lit by this wonderful guide.

John Hennessy has been one of the most creative leaders of our time, combining intellect with wisdom. As Stanford University's president, he was a great manager and executive as well as a visionary. In addition, he has mentored and molded scores of other great leaders. So he has a deep understanding of the components of leadership.

There is no one formula for being a great leader. Take America's founders, for example. Some were men of great intellectual vision, such as Jefferson and Madison. Others had great passion, like John Adams and his cousin Samuel. Washington's foremost traits were his rectitude, gravitas, and commanding presence. And then there were leaders like Benjamin Franklin, whose sage manner and humor could bring strong personalities together and get them to collaborate and compromise.

Through his own experience and from watching others, Hennessy draws lessons from various leadership styles and is able to distill ten core concepts. They are presented in this book not simply as abstract principles but with insightful stories and memorable anecdotes that bring them to life.

He begins with humility, which is fitting because that is a quality that is most evident and surprising in himself. Both in person and in

this book, Hennessy exudes the strength that comes from confidence but also the openness that comes with the true humility of wanting to appreciate the opinions of others.

We often think great leaders need to be driven by unwavering conviction and willing to ignore second-guessers. We think they need to have a healthy ego. In fact, however, the worst combination for a leader is to combine ego and insecurity, as happens too often, especially in politics. Both in this book and in his life, Hennessy shows how the recipe for great leadership is the opposite: being secure yet humble.

Two of the people I have written about—Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs—were not known for being humble. But in fact they each had a deep inner humility. For Einstein, it stemmed from the awe he felt for the beauty of nature’s laws. When a sixth-grade girl from New York wrote to ask about his religious feelings, he replied, “There is a spirit manifest in the laws of the universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of humankind—in the face of which we must feel very humble.” For Jobs, who was deeply spiritual, his Buddhist training did not rid him of his surface brashness and occasional aggressiveness, but he listened intently and fully processed the opinions of others.

Benjamin Franklin once said that he was never able to master the virtue of humility, but he learned the pretense of humility—he knew that feigning it was useful in dealing with others. That would seem to defy Hennessy’s second principle of leadership, which is to be authentic. Franklin, however, goes on to teach us, as does Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, that we become the mask we wear. In other words, when we have difficulty in mastering a virtue, it sometimes helps to display it nonetheless, and over time we will be able to internalize it. I personally found that true for another of Hennessy’s leadership skills, courage. As a leader of journalistic enterprises, I was often afraid to take risks, but by putting on a front of fearlessness at important moments I learned how to be actually more courageous.

Humility forms the foundation for many of the other principles that Hennessy describes, such as empathy and regarding leadership as service. It is especially relevant for one of the key concepts in this book, which is the importance of collaboration. As Franklin explained in his autobiography, displaying and then learning humility caused him to listen to other people, help them find common ground, and get them to work together. The four seminal innovations of the digital age—the transistor, computer, microchip, and packet-switched network—were all developed by collaborative teams rather than singular inventors. When I asked Steve Jobs what his greatest product was, he did not say the Macintosh or the iPhone, but instead simply said, “the team at Apple.”

Hennessy also explores the virtue of curiosity, which is a trait that was exemplified by my latest biography’s subject, Leonardo da Vinci. Da Vinci had an insatiable drive to learn everything possible about everything that was knowable. With a passion both playful and obsessive, he pursued studies of anatomy, fossils, art, architecture, music, birds, the heart, flying machines, optics, botany, geology, water flows, and weaponry. It allowed him to fathom how the “infinite works of nature,” as he put it, are woven together in a unity filled with marvelous patterns. His ability to combine art and science, made iconic by his drawing of a perfectly proportioned man spread-eagled inside a circle and square, known as Vitruvian Man, made him history’s most creative genius. That trait of wide-ranging curiosity is one that distinguishes the truly creative leaders of our time as well, including Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and John Hennessy.

There is one leadership skill in this book that I found a bit unexpected but also profound: storytelling. One of my early mentors, the novelist Walker Percy, told me when I left our home state to become a journalist in New York, “There are two types of people who come out of Louisiana, preachers and storytellers. Be a storyteller, because the world already has too many preachers.” That is the joy of Hennessy’s book. It is filled with lessons, but he conveys them

through stories. He understands that leadership is about creating a narrative. If you know how to tell the stories, you will be able to shape the narrative.

. . .

Walter Isaacson is a professor of history at Tulane University. He was formerly the CEO of the Aspen Institute, editor of *Time* magazine, and chair of CNN. His books include *The Innovators* and biographies of Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, and Leonardo da Vinci.

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INTRODUCTION

“Regard your good name as the richest jewel you can possibly be possessed of—for credit is like fire; when once you have kindled it you may easily preserve it, but if you once extinguish it, you will find it an arduous task to rekindle it again. The way to a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear.”

Popularly attributed to Socrates (no definitive source)

Few of us live our lives exactly the way we planned. If we're fortunate, that can be a good thing. Certainly that has been true for me.

In one respect, I have lived my dream. I am still married to my high school sweetheart, Andrea. We have two wonderful sons. I have spent much of my life working in the field of computing, a passion I developed while still in high school, and I have been a professor for forty years at one of the greatest universities in the world, a career I set my sights on when I was an undergraduate.

When I was offered a position as assistant professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering at Stanford, at the age of twenty-five, it was a dream come true. I accepted the offer on the spot (although it was not the best salary offer I received). Choosing my spouse and saying yes to that offer were the two best decisions of my life (in that order).

If, back then, you had asked me my plans, I would have told you that I wished to spend my life exactly where I was, retiring decades

in the future, perhaps with some teaching and research awards, some important published papers, perhaps a patent or two, and the title of emeritus.

It was a lovely dream, and I suspect I would have been happy pursuing it. Indeed, forty years later I still love being in the classroom or engaging in an energetic discussion about research. But, as they say, stuff happens. An unplanned and unexpected step, becoming an entrepreneur, took my journey in a different direction, eventually delivering me to the series of leadership positions I have held over the past twenty-five years.

This book is about the lessons I learned along the way, both during my early years as a professor and then as an entrepreneur, but mostly throughout that twenty-five-year leadership journey. These stories recount what worked, and sometimes didn't work, for me. While a few of the lessons apply most directly either to industry or to the academic and nonprofit worlds, aspects of each prove relevant either way. Similarly, while my experiences range from being a first-level leader to leading an entire institution, most of what I have learned applies to any level of leadership. Yes, the crises get bigger and come faster when you are at the top of a large organization, but the problems, and how they could be best confronted, are similar.

As Walter Isaacson says in the Foreword, "There is no one formula for being a great leader." Nor do I believe there are many dictates, beyond the obvious and conventional ones. Instead, I offer my thoughts about ten elements of leadership that shaped my journey, along with a set of stories about how I relied on these traits in pivotal moments. I hope others find these reflections helpful in their own leadership journeys.

Before diving in, I want to offer a little more background. I came to Stanford in 1977, a time when Silicon Valley and the information age were young. Apple was only a year old; Intel was still a modest-sized company making primarily memory chips. Personal computers, the Internet, the World Wide Web, and cellular phones had not yet

been invented. I began my career teaching and doing research with a focus on Very Large Scale Integration (VLSI) and the emergence of microprocessors. Although I had some early involvement in two start-ups—most important, Jim Clark’s company, Silicon Graphics—my attention was overwhelmingly focused on my Stanford career.

As described in Chapter 2, “Authenticity and Trust,” the key step that changed my career trajectory was cofounding a company (MIPS Computer Systems) based on the research I had undertaken at Stanford between 1981 and 1984. During a leave from the university, I gave my primary attention to that company, and even after returning from that leave, the company took up a considerable amount of my consulting time and summers. Although I flirted several times with the idea of remaining at MIPS, I really missed working with the students, both in the classroom and in research, so I made Stanford my primary home once again.

The five years that passed from the time we founded MIPS until its successful IPO changed me. Having faced several crises in the company, I felt better positioned to handle such challenges. Furthermore, having seen how a small, determined team could change the world by starting something new, I was ambitious to see my department, my school (engineering), and my university make a bigger and more positive impact in the world. I could have returned to simply being a professor: in my view, there is no more noble or rewarding career for an individual contributor. Instead I embarked on what would become a leadership journey of twenty-plus years.

Initially, the leadership demands were modest: I was director of Stanford’s Computer System Laboratory, an interdisciplinary laboratory of about fifteen faculty members in computer science and electrical engineering. There I enjoyed helping find and recruit great new colleagues, as well as mentoring and supporting them as they began their Stanford careers. In 1994, I was asked to chair Stanford’s Computer Science Department, but I still managed to teach and lead a research group doing exciting work.

Two years later, I was named dean of the School of Engineering. The job was much bigger: two-hundred-plus faculty members instead of thirty-five, but my colleagues were all engineers. We spoke a common vocabulary and had similar measures of success. I loved that job. My wife still insists it was the best job of the many I have held. Why? Well, I could know all the faculty in the school, have some idea of what their research was about, individually greet and welcome every new professor we hired, and still teach a course every year and advise a few PhD students.

All of that changed three years later, in 1999, when Stanford president Gerhard Casper asked me to succeed Condoleezza Rice as provost, the equivalent of chief operating officer of the university. I was astonished—and a bit worried. As you will see, accepting that job was a big step.

A few months later, to my surprise, President Casper announced his intention to resign at the end of the academic year that was just starting. I had taken the job to work closely with President Casper, to focus on big institutional challenges, and as an opportunity to learn about my colleagues outside of engineering. In truth, I was still learning the ropes of a challenging new post. Nonetheless, after an extensive search process running from October to March, and many meetings with search committee members, the board of trustees asked me to become Stanford's tenth president, starting in the fall of 2000.

Despite the vetting process, I was somewhat amazed—and more than a little afraid. I was only forty-seven, my experiences as a senior executive in a large institution were brief, and my knowledge of navigating a vast bureaucracy was limited. I worried that I would disappoint everyone. Yet I was attracted by the challenge of enhancing an institution that had done so much for me. I hoped that I could succeed, if I approached the job with humility about my own skills, a scientist's respect for the facts, and a stellar team.

While I had my experience from Silicon Valley and a set of colleagues at Stanford, whom I regarded as friends, other than Presi-

dent Casper and a few members of the board of trustees, I did not have many senior people to look toward for advice. So, like any good researcher, I began reading books on leadership, especially biographies of great leaders: how they developed, how they worked with others, and how they overcame adversity. (You'll see a list of those books in the Coda.) I also resolved to stay intellectually curious and to expand my interests beyond science and technology to encompass the humanities, the social sciences, medicine, and the arts.

Did I succeed as a university president? Did I become a great leader along the way? Did our team make a great university even better? That's not for me to decide. The metric that the provost, John Etchemendy, and I thought was most important for measuring our success was the quality of the people, the faculty and students that are the university. That's difficult to measure, compared to simpler metrics such as facilities built or dollars raised. At the end of my tenure as president in August 2016, by most measures of the faculty and student quality (for example, rankings, selectivity, and yield), Stanford was a match for the best universities in the world. In addition, we had established a leadership position in multidisciplinary research and teaching, a goal the provost and I had embraced early in our terms (see Chapter 7, "Innovation"). The longevity of our joint tenure—sixteen years, or roughly double the national average for university presidents—was key to what we accomplished.

By all rights, the story might have ended there. What could I possibly do that could be even a fraction as challenging and impactful as running Stanford University? I sat on the boards of Google, Cisco, and several important foundations. Surely that work, plus perhaps teaching a few courses, would be a fitting conclusion to my somewhat unexpected career.

That's when the most extraordinary thing happened: a musing of mine about the need to train the next generation of the world's leaders was suddenly realized with the help of one of America's great business leaders, Phil Knight, the founder of Nike. Together