

HOW THE BEST LEADERS  
LEARN TO LET GO

THE  
POWER OF  
GIVING AWAY  
POWER

A detail from Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam' showing two hands reaching towards each other. The hand on the left is reaching out, and the hand on the right is reaching in, with their fingers just inches apart. This image is overlaid on the book cover text.

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EXCERPT



# INTRODUCTION

PRETENDING IS EXHAUSTING.

So it's surprising how many of us get up every day and do exactly that under the banner of leadership. Pretending that we know the precise destination, what steps in what order are required to get there, and how any unexpected obstacles can be cleared away as we drive toward an inevitably successful outcome. All the while projecting supreme confidence.

Around the year 2000, organizations of all kinds, from Rhode Island's historical society to the multinational conglomerate Siemens, churned out strategic planning reports for the decades ahead called "Vision 2020." The number proved an irresistible temptation to pretend we could see with perfect 20/20 vision into the future for our companies, communities, and countries. The glossy reports spelled out confidently what could be expected in 2020 and what to do to seize the coming

opportunities. In 2018, with just two years to go, Harvard Business School published a guide asking “Is Your ‘Vision 2020’ Leadership Development Strategy on the Path to Success?” Then that year arrived with a vengeance as if to say, “Oh, yeah?”

In our hearts, we know how scarce certainty is. Even the ultimate leadership guru Peter Drucker, who first found fame advocating “management by objective,” admitted that leaders know their true objective only 10 percent of the time at best. Still we hold on tightly to the theater of pretending and predicting. Why?

We do it because there is something we dislike even more than the exhaustion of pretending. Much more. We hate the anxiety of uncertainty. Pretending is the price we pay to remove it.

So we comfort ourselves with orderly org charts, working backward from a preset destination, factoring out what we can’t measure, tasking team members using “key performance indicators”—monitoring it all with “dashboards,” turning and tuning the dials as if running a machine. It is our way of self-soothing by exerting control and power over whatever and whomever we can.

We think we must hoard power before someone else takes it and that we must lord it over others. We’ve not only come to value the consolidation and preservation of power as the best kind of leadership; we’ve come to believe it’s the only kind—that it *is* leadership.

How crazy.

All we have to do is look around to see that there are other kinds of leaders who have adopted a very different mindset about uncertainty. They don't try to ignore it, avoid it, or factor it out. They factor it in—radically. They do this not by hoarding and lording power, but by doing the opposite—by giving it away. In this way, they turn the anxiety of uncertainty into the energy that drives diverse groups of people to build unbelievably big things together.

In my twenty-five years of working across three different fields—dot-com startups, President Obama's campaigns, and international diplomacy—I've been a witness to great leaders who hold this mindset. They share a particular way of seeing, thinking, feeling, and behaving with the people around them. I have tried to practice this mindset—one that we are all capable of, and one that I am certain the world needs more of these days.

I saw this mindset at work up close in 2008. Barack Obama's campaign against Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination had reached a critical juncture. Obama won the first contest in Iowa in an upset, but lost the next one in New Hampshire. Pundits pounced. Barack and Michelle had camped out in Iowa for nearly a year and had deployed a huge chunk of their campaign staff there. Anyone can pull an upset in one state with a lot of focus and a little luck, but now the Clinton "machine" would surely kick into gear and normal political logic would take over.

In the course of nearly a decade, the Clinton team had locked up the key endorsements in each state, and now each of these state power brokers would, in turn, release their loyal legions of get-out-the-vote foot soldiers. How could the Obama campaign possibly match the proven math of that political pyramid?

Two young Obama staffers pitched a radical solution to the campaign leadership in Chicago that went against decades of modern campaign orthodoxy. They had been sent to states with almost no paid staff and had been noticing the same thing. Delegating work and responsibilities to unknown, unpaid, untrained volunteers was not generating the normal headaches. In fact, just the opposite: giving away work and responsibility led to more volunteers showing up and asking for more work and responsibility. It kept growing. What if we treated these volunteers more like paid staff?

But here was the most radical part: What if we even gave them access to the “voter file”? This is a campaign’s precious guarded data bank of possible voters, where they live, and how likely they are to vote for you.

The campaign leadership said no. There would be spies from rival campaigns. The state power brokers working on behalf of the Clinton campaign would certainly scoop up the data, essentially stealing our playbook. The staffers persisted. They admitted that their plan couldn’t prevent that but made the case that a growing universe of committed and empowered

people would be worth a lot more than any potential downside from data stealing. If they didn't open up the campaign, they would definitely have to turn people away. There was simply no other way of unleashing the energy and letting the campaign grow.

The campaign leaders had seen these young staffers work miracles already. They decided to place their faith in them and their way of thinking. "Okay, go for it." And they were glad they did, because it worked to win the party nomination. But the true test would be whether it worked on Election Day in November against the strength of a unified national party that had won the last two elections.

When that day came, the Obama campaign unleashed every volunteer to help get out the vote. There's a famous metric in field organizing called the *flake rate*, which refers to the percentage of pre-committed volunteers who flake out and don't show up to do the work they promised. A really bad flake rate is 80 percent, where eight in ten don't show up because they feel either all is lost or else it's in the bag. A really good flake rate could be as low as 30 percent. As a rule of thumb, you plan on 50 percent.

On election night, as we celebrated President Obama's historic win in Chicago, I was eager to know what our flake rate had turned out to be and asked one of the field team leaders. She had just gotten the data from her colleague in Virginia, one of the important swing states Obama won that night. "There wasn't

one . . . or I guess you could say it was negative . . . negative fifty percent,” she reported. Wait, what? She explained that for every ten people who committed to volunteering, fifteen people showed up. They did the opposite of flaking out. They showed up and brought new people in. They multiplied. With this different mindset, the campaign reached new mathematical territory. It made the flake rate obsolete.

This mindset of giving away power to create more is all too rare these days, but those young field organizers were not alone. There have always been people all around us who are making a huge difference by seeing things in a way the rest of us are missing.

With this different mindset, a middle manager at a midsize bank in a mid-tier city transformed the chaos of the early credit card business into the largest commercial enterprise the world has ever known.

With this different mindset, a commodities trader from Alabama found new energy in the apparent anarchy of the internet, beat out the richest company in the world, and in so doing spawned the largest human knowledge transfer engine the world has ever known.

And with this different mindset, a stockbroker made a house call to a doctor in Akron, Ohio, and they discovered a new method for mutual healing by placing uncertainty at the center of their conversations, creating the largest anti-addiction platform the world has ever known.

But these leaders didn't get there without a struggle. After experiencing the inevitable frustrations of forcing others to comply with their plan, their next instinct was to go it alone. We all do that. But eventually each leader made the same key insight. They discovered that independence is just another form of dependence—dependence on oneself, all alone. They discovered something more powerful beyond both dependence and independence.

With their help, we will too. And we will be guided by a woman who was one of the most influential leadership thinkers of her day. She is the intellectual interpreter and matron saint of this mindset. In fact, Drucker credits her with being his guru and the “brightest star” in the constellation of leaders, yet she was nearly erased from history.

To paraphrase another character you will meet later: I am in this book, but it's not about me. You are in this book, but it's not about you. It is about you and me and a third thing that is a character in itself—namely, “us, together.” This book is about the power we can create by giving away power to this third character—which gives power back to us to be given away again. And again.

This book is a practical and sometimes personal history of an idea and a mindset. It chronicles my own growing awareness of an ineffable something that defines the leaders I most admire, and my attempt to give that a name and a shape. The journey takes us through history and across politics, industries,

and national borders, mingling stories of near-forgotten gurus with stories from my life as an ambassador to Sweden and the UK and adviser to Obama's presidential campaigns. We will see not only how this mindset started some of the most consequential organizations and innovations the world has ever known; we will also see that it even started the greatest idea for a country the world has ever known. And that's where the story begins.

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