



## 33 Leadership Things to Do Before You Retire

*"Musicians don't retire; they stop when there's no more music in them."*

Louis Armstrong

## "Things to do"

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*"This life is a short journey. How can you make sure you fill it with the most fun and that you visit all the coolest places on earth before you pack those bags for the very last time?"*

Dave Freeman

Earlier this year, the man who co-wrote the best-selling adventure travel guide "100 Things To Do Before You Die" died. Tragically, he tripped over in the hall of his beach-side house in Venice, California and banged his head.

Dave Freeman had visited half the places mentioned in his book whose recommendations included a voodoo pilgrimage to Haiti and running with bulls in Pamplona, Spain. The guide to the world's wackiest places suggested nude night surfing in Australia and taking part in the loudest yelling competition in North Carolina. It was an instant bestseller and inspired a publishing industry all of its own with dozens of '100 Things' spin-offs.

Here is our take on a list of leadership things to do: the challenges to face and the experiences to live before you retire as a leader.

## The survey

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In October 2008, we surveyed a range of professionals working within a variety of talent management, leadership development and executive coaching roles, in both the corporate and consulting sectors. No doubt a skewed sample, but a collection of individuals who in total have worked with thousands of aspiring, currently effective as well as derailed leaders.

The question:

**“to retire as a successful leader, proud of having made a positive impact, what experiences will have made most difference?”**

What are the critical events, tasks and challenges that shape a flourishing leadership life, a leadership career based on capability and character that has driven sustainable success, personally and organisationally?

The response to the survey was impressive. Allowing for overlap and the elimination of the highly specific (and occasionally, the bizarre), we summarised the poll findings:

**the 33 “must have’s” to encounter, tackle and overcome to become a leader who survives and thrives**

*“Jon Moulton, head of venture group Alchemy, looks at the number of divorces a leader has had. For him one divorce is ideal because he feels at that time people have something to prove and they want to improve their financial position. But two divorces or more can start to look like carelessness.”*

Daily Telegraph, 13 September

# The top 33

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Broadly the themes could be grouped into the following themes:

## Getting to grips with business fundamentals

1. Work on the shop floor
2. Manage a turnaround
3. Spend time in sales
4. Improvise when you're short of resources
5. Push for P & L responsibility
6. Formulate a distinctive strategy
7. Initiate and implement quickly a major change project
8. Challenge assumptions of business success

## Acquiring key skills in extending the repertoire of leadership capability

9. Work with a demanding boss
10. Swim in a big pool of exceptionally talented fish
11. Manage a project with multiple stakeholders
12. Inherit and fix an under-performing team
13. Manage a specialist team outside existing expertise
14. Embark on a high profile high risk undertaking
15. Communicate tough news
16. Meet a progressive thinker and stay in touch
17. Explain a complex idea by telling a story
18. Identify and develop a successor

## Personal mastery and the building of leadership character

19. Experience a notable failure
20. Forgive an adversary
21. Stay around to see the consequences of a big decision
22. Work hard for an extended period on an intensive project
23. Keep an uncomfortable commitment
24. Negotiate with hardball players
25. Undertake a 360° feedback exercise and feedforward
26. Go it alone
27. Fire a top performing individual

## Establishing and maintaining leadership credibility

28. Operate like a leader to become a leader
29. Create a credible personal brand
30. Say "no" to protect your reputation

## Learning the lessons of career management to survive within the vagaries of organisational life

31. Come off the sidelines to engage with politics
32. Look after your body
33. Keep a straight face

# 1. Work on the shop floor

Financial data, market research and operational metrics provide key intelligence to guide decision making. But leaders who rely on measurement systems - “lies, lies and damned statistics” - can lose sight of business realities.

Leaders who have made it an ongoing habit to spend time with “real people”, front line employees and customers to explore what lies behind the statistics sharpen their commercial intuition. And by staying close to the front line, they were also able to read the organisational mood and identify emerging problems.



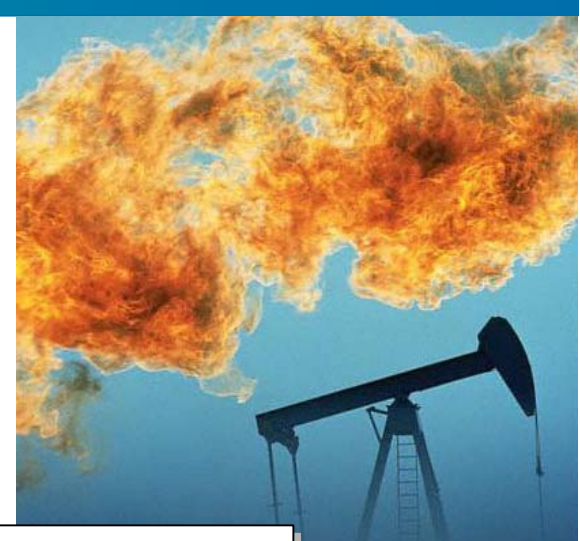
*“A person who has front line contact has ten full steps on the competition.”*

Tom Peters

## 2. Manage a turnaround

Organisations can over-extend themselves, moving into activities that are unprofitable and can't be sustained. Or previous success allows complacency to develop and productivity falls, and the organisation faces serious competitive threat.

Turnarounds - fixing the organisational mess - call on a diverse set of skills in financial analysis, work flow mapping and team development. They also test and build the qualities of determination and emotional resilience.



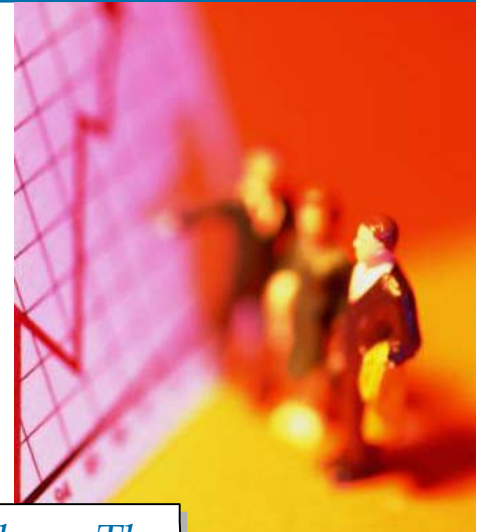
*"It scares you: all the noise, the rattling, the shaking. But the look on everybody's face when you're finished and packing, it's the best smile in the world; the well's under control."*

Red Adair

### 3. Spend time in sales

Leaders who haven't been on the front line of sales effort have missed a powerful leadership experience.

Direct contact with customers in sales activity provides a keen insight into shifting customer trends and identifying what they like and don't like about the organisation's current product and service mix. Operating within a sales role is also one of the most important ways of recognising the tough realities of competition, and how a business can be out manoeuvred by rivals playing hardball.



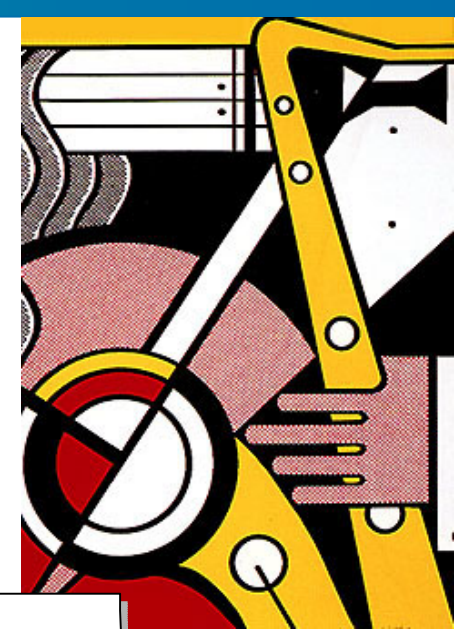
*"There is only one boss. The customer. And they can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending their money somewhere else."*

Sam Walton

## 4. Improvise when you're short of resources

Big budgets encourage complacency and a sense that all is well with the world. They also reinforce business lethargy; after all, there is little incentive to think creatively about the optimisation of resources.

Bureaucratic management looks for more money and people to achieve its goals. Faced by big aspirations but access to few resources, individuals are forced to draw on their personal resources of initiative and ingenuity. It is this experience that also builds networking skills in “foraging” resources from other quarters.



*“The fewer natural resources your company has, the more you will dig inside yourself for innovations in order to survive.”*

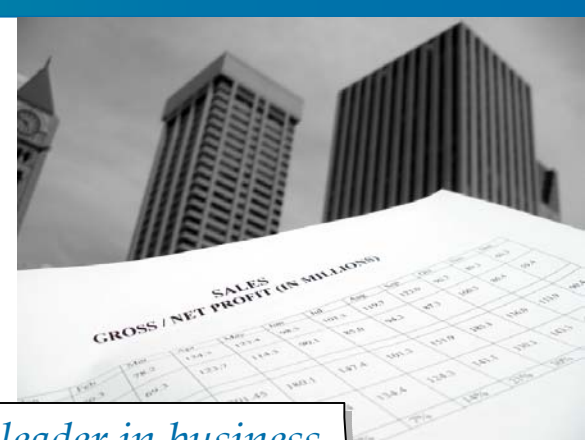
Thomas L. Friedman

## 5. Push for P & L responsibility

The management of a budget imposes the discipline of cost control and operating efficiency. Sales turnover tracks success in entrepreneurial thinking and business development.

Responsibility for managing the top and bottom line creates a different and more important leadership challenge.

Leaders who have had Profit & Loss accountability at an early stage in their careers have had to learn quickly a business imperative: profitability and cash flow management are part of an overall jigsaw that is critical to sustained success.



*“If you are a leader in business and don’t understand finance, you will spend your career bluffing your way through meetings.”*

Warren Buffett

## 6. Formulate a distinctive strategy

Strategy is simple since it represents the permutation of only three variables: capability, customers and competitors. But finding sustainable strategic space - building capabilities aligned to profitable customers that maintains a distance from competitors - is difficult.

Talking strategy to draw on the jargon of synergy, positioning and leverage is easy. Thinking strategically to understand the complex dynamics of the market place and spot new opportunities to formulate an innovative business model and distinctive strategic stance is not easy.

Individuals who have been part of a start up, working with a team that combined commercial smarts, creative flair and critical thinking have had a major career advantage.



*"Everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything in strategy is very easy."*

Karl von Clausewitz

## 7. Initiate and implement quickly a major change project

Talking about the need for business transformation is one thing. Formulating a breakthrough strategy is another. And taking responsibility for leading change, and navigating through the hazards and pitfalls is yet another thing.

This isn't a plodding and over-engineered consultancy-led programme; this is individuals taking the lead in introducing and implementing change at pace to tight deadline against stretch goals. And this experience builds key skills in planning, organisational influence and political management.



*"Where does  
leadership begin?  
Where change begins."*

James McGregor Burns

## 8. Challenge assumptions of business success

Successful organisations go into decline when they rely on a recipe that is no longer relevant to the market place, as competitor dynamics shift and customer expectations change.

Leaders anticipate the moment when strategic repositioning is required by asking awkward questions:

- are we succeeding because of or in spite of our current strategy?
- what assumptions are we making about the future?
- what are the greatest threats to our long-term success?
- what would we need to do to out manoeuvre our main competitors?

This is not an approach for peer popularity when things are going well. But it will be the voice of wisdom to sustain long-term success.



*"What got you here  
won't get you there."*

Marshall Goldsmith

## 9. Work with a demanding boss

Bosses come in all shapes and sizes, “good, bad and ugly”. Exposure to a demanding manager emerges in our survey as a key theme in successful leadership careers.

Because demanding leaders don't settle for mediocrity but instead push for excellence, they enlarge the sense of what is possible. And through the stretch they provide, they expose shortcomings, reminding emerging leaders of their limitations, and ensuring that arrogance - that risk factor that derails many leaders - isn't allowed to take hold.



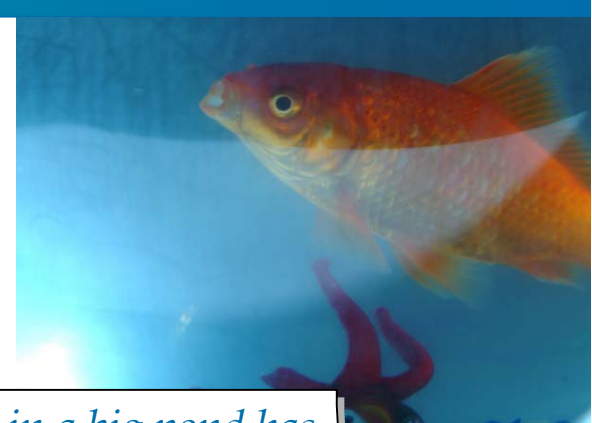
*“You have to find gears you felt you never had, where you push yourself to the absolute extreme, both mentally and physically.”*

Gordon Ramsay

## 10. Swim in a big pool of exceptionally talented fish

It's tempting to be a big fish in a small pool. But a small pool doesn't provide sufficient stretch and challenge to put leadership to the test.

Leaders who look to work with the "brightest and best" in their field will find leadership life more taxing. But they will access high levels of expertise and talent that will ratchet up their own capability. And building up a network of exceptional talent opens up future contacts and new opportunities throughout the leadership career.



*"A little fish in a big pond has gotta have lots of heart...*

*The little fish spreads his fins and begins to grow, grow, grow."*

Irving Berlin

## 11. Manage a project with multiple stakeholders

Everyone wants something and they want it immediately. But they want different things.

Leadership is a juggling act to recognise and reconcile competing and conflicting stakeholder expectations. Projects that involve a range of constituent groups - inside and outside the organisation - each with a distinctive agenda, provide the opportunity to develop key skills in conflict management. They also help widen the leadership horizon to see the world through others' eyes.



*"Those who have learned to disagree without being disagreeable have discovered the most valuable secret."*

Robert Estabrook

## 12. Inherit and fix an under-performing team

Whilst all leaders would want a capable and motivated team to support their efforts, the reality is that leaders will inherit a work group comprising what has been called “the good, bad, mad and sad”.

This leadership experience is the platform to build powerful insights and skills: insights in understanding the psychology of human nature, motivation and personal change, and skills in goal setting, performance management, confrontation and coaching.



*“Human nature is complex. Any attempt to make sense of behaviour through the prism of any one theory will disappoint.”*

Charlie Munger

## 13. Manage a specialist team outside existing expertise

Leadership is more a game of chess than checkers. In checkers, the pieces all move in the same way. In chess, all the pieces move differently. Managing a work group with a different technical skill set is one of the fastest ways to learn this important lesson.

Taking on responsibility for managing a work group outside current expertise and know-how represents an insight into the diversity of teams. It is also a powerful lesson in the management of ambiguity, the importance of establishing an overall vision and defined outcomes, and getting to grips with the process of delegation.



*“Not to know certain things is a great part of wisdom.”*

Hugo Grotius

## 14. Embark on a high profile high risk undertaking

Leadership for the most part is made up of a series of calculated risk assessments to evaluate systematically the pros and cons of competing ideas. But there are times to throw caution to the wind to take on what Jim Collins has called the BHAG's: the "big hairy audacious goals".

Leadership that looks back with pride on a successful career hasn't opted for a safe and comfortable existence. Taking big risks in public is hazardous. But it seems to be an important driver of long term success.



*"Yes, risk taking is inherently failure-prone. Otherwise, it would be called sure-thing-taking."*

Tim McMahon

## 15. Communicate tough news

The communication of a positive and up-beat message of business progress motivates and inspires, reinforcing the “feel good factor”.

Announcing a major flaw in a product, dealing with a major down sizing programme, or facing adverse media reaction are not the kind of challenges that at first sight seem part of a flourishing leadership career. But this kind of leadership experience seems to provide key learning in ethical decision making, strategic communication and stress management.



*“To be persuasive we must be believable. To be believable we must be credible. To be credible, we must be truthful.”*

Ed Murrow

## 16. Meet a progressive thinker and stay in touch

There are some exceptionally gifted individuals in life, individuals with highly developed expertise, skills and wisdom. Encountering and cultivating a long-term relationship with these individuals emerges as a powerful factor in accelerating leadership development.

Meeting and working with these talented and creative individuals isn't simply a matter of good luck. Leaders who have utilised good judgement to spot these individuals at an early point, and been proactive in forging close relationships with them, have gained significant benefits throughout the course of their leadership careers.



*"Keep friends for  
friendship, but work  
with the skilled and  
competent."*

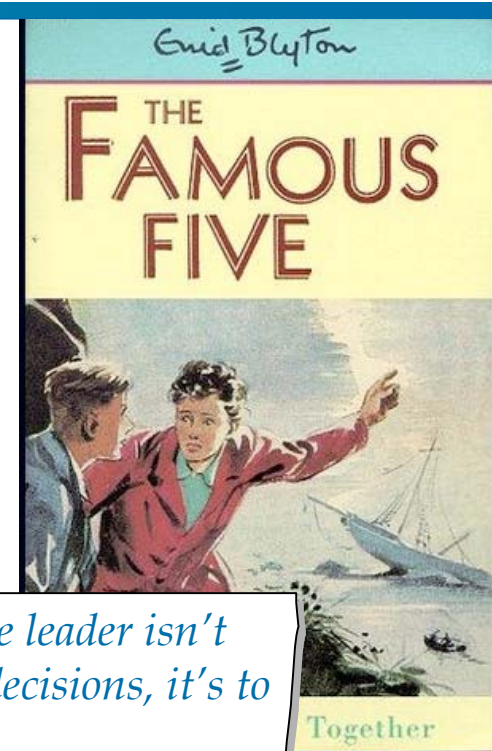
Robert Greene

## 17. Explain a complex idea by telling a story

Albert Einstein said that he could explain the general theory of relativity to an intelligent bar maid.

Most organisations are struggling to make sense of events around them. There is much data but not enough intelligent meaning. Individuals who have faced the task of simplifying complexity and working out how best to articulate the key themes to the work force have overcome an important leadership hurdle: making sense to provide purpose and direction.

This is a test of leadership life that develops skills in communication - not through graphs and pie charts - but through stories to highlight the critical issues, explain priorities and appeal to others' emotions and imagination.



*"The job of the leader isn't just to make decisions, it's to make sense."*

John Seely Brown

## 18. Identify and develop a successor

This is a challenge that has defeated no small number of otherwise successful leaders. Indeed the lack of succession planning has triggered the trajectory of decline for many businesses.

For some leaders, planning for their succession has proved an emotionally difficult exercise, raising issues they would rather not confront. But for those who did accept this leadership challenge, it moved their leadership careers into a fulfilling phase. Here the agenda is one of developing skills in coaching and mentoring to shape the organisational future and leave a lasting legacy.



*“Succession has always been the ultimate test of any top management and the ultimate test of any institution.”*

Peter Drucker

## 19. Experience a notable failure

Confidence is important in leadership life. But confidence can easily cross the line into leadership hubris, the pride that has been the dynamic of downfall. The signs:

- an inflated view of our own capabilities based on our accomplishments
- getting involved in activities outside our zone of competence. Here success in overcoming one business challenge gives a sense of invulnerability in taking on other challenges
- encouraging only positive feedback and dismissing any difficult messages.
- focusing on today's successes rather than build for the future.

Failure seems to be a critical leadership event in re-evaluating the dynamics of leadership success, rethinking future priorities and tactics, as well as shaping the quality of leadership humility.



*“Success is not built on success. It's built on failure. It's built on frustration. Sometimes its built on catastrophe.”*

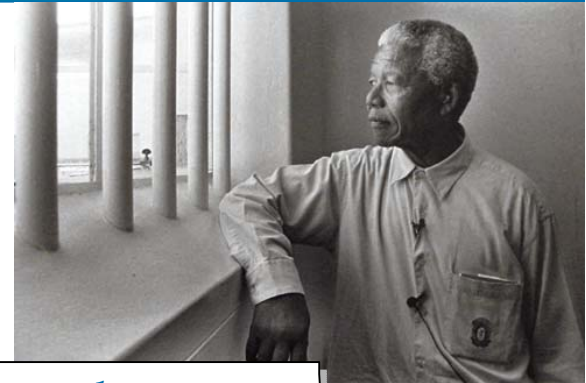
Sumner Redstone

## 20. Forgive an adversary

At his inaugural acceptance speech, Nelson Mandela as he went on stage shook the hands of the four prison guards who had kept him captive for years. A key moment in helping South Africa address its past and move towards a better future.

Individuals who attempt to make a difference will encounter opposition, and at times, the resentment and “dirty tricks” of rivals. And a sense of grievance can build, becoming damaging to individual leaders as well as to the organisation.

Emerging leaders have found that forgiveness is good for the leadership soul.



*“Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.”*

Paul Boese

## 21. Stay around to see the consequences of a big decision

Starting a new initiative is easy for leaders. It attracts organisational attention and indicates a serious player who wants to make improvements. But staying with the project - through the thick and thin - to manage the follow through and evaluate its long-term impact represents another and more difficult challenge.

The law of unintended consequences ensures that Murphy's law is a business constant. When individuals tie their "colours to the mast", looking to be judged on long-term results rather than initial success, they have passed another leadership test.



*These things happened. They were glorious and they changed the world... and then we \*\*\*\*\* up the end game."*

Charlie Wilson's War

## 22. Work hard for an extended period on an intensive project

“There is a fine line between ‘character building’ and ‘soul destroying’.” But there are some work activities that require hands-on sustained concentration over a prolonged period.

This is the leadership lesson in “sweating the small stuff”. When an emerging problem is escalating to the tipping point of business catastrophe, or when a product innovation requires painstaking attention to detail, the challenge is one of disciplined activity and physical and psychological stamina.

And an additional insight from this experience: recognising the importance of planning and coordination to avoid the imposition of unrealistic demands on staff.



*“It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer.”*

Albert Einstein

## 23. Keep an uncomfortable commitment

“It is an immutable law in business that words are words, explanations are explanations, promises are promises but only performance is reality.”

It is the willingness to make and fulfil commitments that distinguishes effective leaders from those who are leaders by position only. Genuine leaders don't hide behind the empty words of jargon or the smokescreen of over-complex project plans.

But sometimes a commitment can be made that becomes troublesome. A deal is agreed without working through the long-term ramifications, or a promise is made to a major customer that is ill-judged. Leaders keep their commitments, but learn the lesson of caution in making future promises.



*“Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans.”*

Peter Drucker

## 24. Negotiate with “hardball” players

Nikita Khrushchev, President of the Soviet Union, is attending a United Nations conference in the mid 1960s. In his display of anger at U.S. policy, Khrushchev pounds the lectern with his shoe. Photographic evidence indicates that he was wearing both shoes at the time. So where did the third shoe come from?

Negotiational effectiveness is underplayed in many leadership frameworks. But it emerges in this survey as a driver of leadership success. Leaders who have faced shrewd operators during their careers have learnt key lessons in communication tactics, conflict management and commercial reality.



*“The successful person has unusual skill in dealing with conflict and ensuring the best outcome for all.”*

Sun Tzu


## 25. Undertake a 360° feedback exercise and feedforward

“If feedback is difficult, the alternative is worse.”

Traditional performance appraisals are most of the time a waste of time. 360° feedback provides a more credible perspective, capturing the perceptions of leadership impact and effectiveness from peers, team members and other stakeholders.

360° feedback processes no doubt can be manipulated. But undertaken in “good faith” with honest and humility they represent an important stock take within leadership careers.

And leaders who have moved from feedback to feedforward to review the outcomes with their colleagues have accelerated their learning and development.



*“Only in fairy tales are emperors told that they are naked.”*

Warren Buffett

## 26. Go it alone

Leadership is played out in the context of others. An individual without followers isn't a leader however impressive their talents and skills. Leadership is about the "we" of organisational life, and the coordination of others' energies.

But an important theme in this survey is the message that leadership is also "me". This isn't the kind of independence that becomes leadership isolation and eccentricity. But individuals who have had to stand back to re-evaluate life purpose and priorities have experienced important learning. It has been an opportunity to develop a personal vision of the future and pursue a distinctive leadership path.



*"If I were asked to define leadership I should say it is the projection of personality. It is the most intensely personal thing in the world because it is just plain you."*

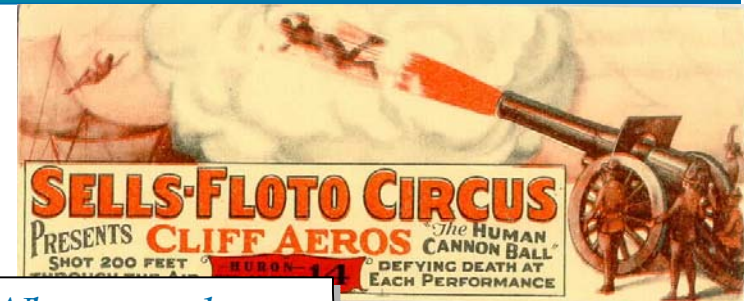
Field Marshal William Slim

## 27. Fire a top performing individual

The top performer, an individual admired for their experience and skill, is making an important difference to the bottom line. But this employee is now displaying behaviours that are counter to the organisation's values and damaging to its culture.

This is a challenge that is difficult and unpleasant. It is a task that needs to be conducted with fairness, respect, dignity, but it isn't one that can be avoided.

In the short-term the experience is troubling; in the longer-term it strengthens integrity of purpose and confidence to face future conflict.



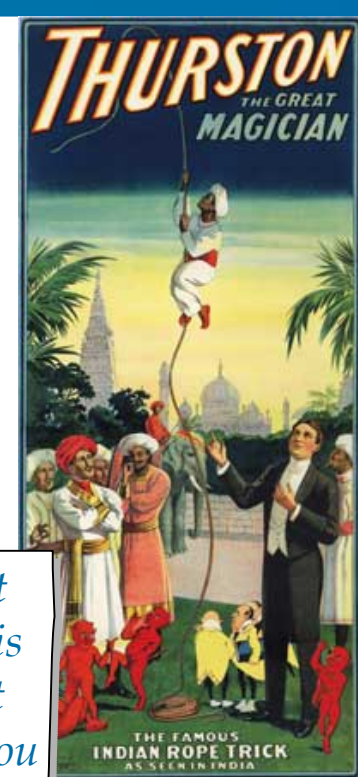
*"When you choose your friends, don't get short-changed by choosing personality over character."*

W Somerset Maugham

## 28. Operate like a leader to become a leader

To occupy a leadership position is not necessarily to perform as a leader. Leadership is taking responsibility for making things happen, with and through others. Emerging leaders project themselves - their demeanour, appearance, and conversation - as if they are already leaders.

This is leadership as the “Indian Rope Trick”, projecting confidence as a rope to climb up into leadership responsibility. A key experience in shaping leadership development is simply doing what leaders do, not waiting for permission or promotion.



*“One of the hardest tasks of leadership is understanding that you are not what you are, but what you're perceived to be by others.”*

Edward L. Flom

## 29. Create a credible personal brand

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Leadership isn't simply collaboration and cooperation; it is also intense competition to advance and progress in the face of peer rivalry. At some point in the leadership career, leaders need to locate what it is they believe in and stand for, and what it is that distinguishes them from their peers.

Developing a credible personal brand isn't a quick makeover exercise in voice coaching or power dressing, useful though these may be for self presentation for some individuals. This is building authentic leadership to express a distinctive personality based on well founded values.



*"No leader sets out to be a leader per se, but rather to express themselves freely and fully. That is leaders have no interest in proving themselves, but an abiding interest in expressing themselves."*

Warren Bennis

## 30. Say “no” to protect your reputation

Reputations are **established** at the beginning of a career by saying “yes”. Here, opportunities are seized by drawing on current strengths to advance into new areas and develop additional skills. But reputation is **maintained** when leaders say “no”.

Wise leaders don’t move into areas where they can’t excel. And they are prepared to say no to opportunities that can only dent their reputation. They know that reputation is a critical leadership asset, and they look after it well.

A key moment in progressing as a leader was the time when leaders said “no” to a superficially attractive proposition.



*“If there are twelve clowns in a ring you can jump in the middle and start reciting Shakespeare, but to the audience you’ll just be the thirteenth clown.”*

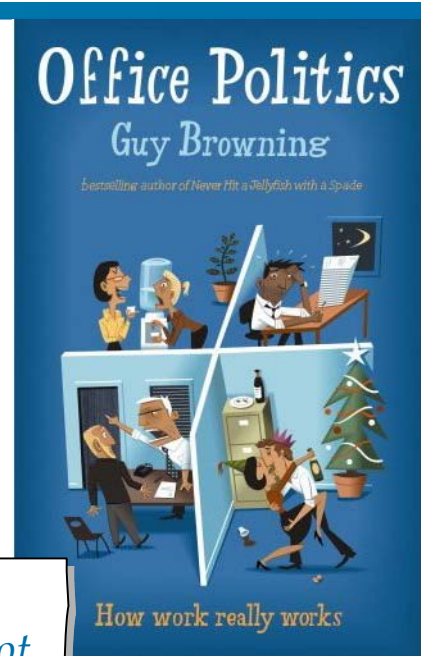
Adam Walinsky

## 31. Come off the sidelines to engage with politics

Organisations don't necessarily make rational decisions based on an objective analysis of the full set of issues. Other "stuff" matters: power inter-plays, functional protectionism, and the dynamics of interpersonal sensitivities.

Organisational influence requires more than business logic. Individuals who want to be "right" won't be leaders who get things done. When leaders grapple with the pragmatics of organisational life rather than re-draft another strategic proposal they will have moved on.

This isn't leadership as self-serving political gamesmanship, but it is the recognition of the importance of consensus and compromise in organisational decision making.



*"Perfect solution of our difficulties are not to be looked for in an imperfect world."*

Winston Churchill

## 32. Look after your body

Leadership is in no small measure about physical stamina. Leadership that is pushing ahead quickly involves a schedule of early rises and late finishes. This isn't to endorse the formula Hours Worked = Leadership Success. But it does recognise the reality that sustaining effectiveness over time is mentally and physically demanding.

Wise leaders seem to have identified with Warren Buffett's insight: "You only get one mind and one body. And it's got to last a lifetime." They operate within a regime of physical and psychological well being. They exercise and eat well, have other interests and passions in life, and know how to relax and re-energise the leadership batteries.



*"Let's say when I turned 16, a genie had appeared to me. And that genie said, 'Warren I'm going to give you the car of your choice'. Having heard all the genie stories I would say, 'what's the catch?'"*

*And the genie would answer, 'There's only one catch. This is the last car you're ever going to get in your life. It's got to last a lifetime.' I would have picked out that car. But, can you imagine, knowing it had to last a lifetime, what would I do with it?"*

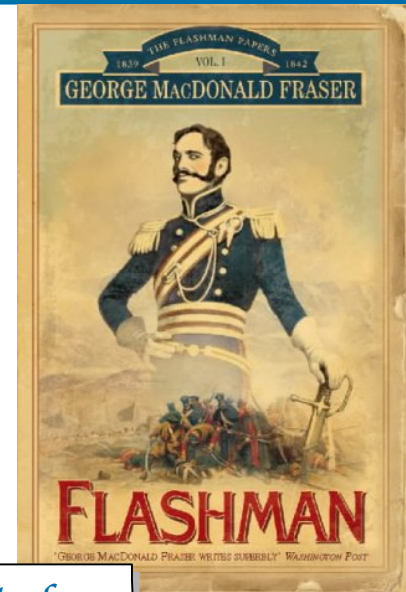
**Warren Buffett**

### 33. Keep a “straight face”

As Dilbert reminds us, organisations can operate in irrational ways, and employees can behave in an absurd manner. This is the reality of human nature, social interaction and organisational hierarchy.

Leadership credibility is not pomposity. Authentic leadership has the confidence to laugh at what is ridiculous and preposterous. Indeed, individuals who don't know how to laugh, and laugh at themselves, lose credibility.

But there times when humour is a potential liability, and when wit and sarcasm can only back-fire. Leaders who have learned when to keep a “straight face” have learned an important lesson in tact and diplomacy.



*“If half the art of survival is running, the other half is keeping a straight face.”*

George Macdonald Fraser

## 33 Things to Do

Leaders of course never really “retire”. But there comes a time when they do move from formal leadership status to take on other life challenges: part time work as non executive Directors or governors; voluntary and charitable activity; participation in the community and politics; making time for friends and family; pursuing passions and pastimes.

Leaders who have “retired”, fulfilled and able to look back with pride on their careers, will have encountered and overcome many of the “33 things to do”. And they will be more effective in tackling the range of life challenges they now face.



*“It’s a new dawn, it’s a new day.”*

Nina Simone

Have we missed any key leadership events, experiences and challenges? Let us know by calling 44 (0) 1608 654007 or email [andrew@amazureconsulting.com](mailto:andrew@amazureconsulting.com).

## About us

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