



“Leadership is an act of service with love at its centre” – Stew Darling

Before we can give love or service to others we first have to learn to love ourselves. In this chapter from his first book “Learn Through Life” Stew Darling provides insights into how to embark on the crucial journey of self-acceptance on the way to becoming the outstanding leader you are meant to be.

This excerpt is a tool to help you to become your best self.

Becoming your best self

“Love is the absence of judgement” – Dalai Lama

How many times have you looked in the mirror and said, “I love you?” I have posed this exact question during many presentations to rooms full of people and it is not uncommon for just one or two hands to go up—and one of them is always mine.

No one thinks about themselves enough.

No one recognises that if you’re going to love, serve, make lasting change or do anything in this world, you’ve actually got to love and respect the person you see every morning when you brush your teeth. When you understand self-awareness and self-management, then you can lead anyone because

You have stock in leading the most difficult person there is to lead in the world—yourself.

As a collective, we don’t do that. If we did, we might not be in the state that we’re in as a society. If we actually recognised that self-awareness and self-management lead to self-love—the true definition of love—things might start to change. We still live in a world with too much obesity and hunger, too many teenage pregnancies, where in some countries it still is legal to marry a thirteen-year-old girl, where we strive to fit in through the use of Botox and plastic surgery. People are body shamed just for being the unique beautiful human beings they really are. And sadly, in too many cases, the “not fitting in” leads to shocking levels of suicide.

We are so mixed up. In working to gain a better understanding of ourselves, there is a chance of less abuse in general as we begin respecting ourselves and those around us.

We don’t respect ourselves in the twenty-first century. And we’ve got to get that back.

It all starts with the man or woman in the mirror.

So how does one begin to implement self-leadership? It’s simple, but it’s not easy.

The Four Aspects of Self-Leadership

1. Self-Awareness

How do you think? You must acknowledge, understand, and be conscious of your own values, perspectives, strengths, weaknesses, leadership maturity, and emotional needs.

2. Self-Management

You must nurture and harness your own passion, abilities, emotions and leadership capacity through making decisions that align with your values.

3. Other-Awareness

You must acknowledge and recognise the passion, strengths, weaknesses, potential, and needs of others.

4. Other-Management

As leaders of self, we must grow and motivate other people to develop their potential and/or fulfil the organisation's objectives. We must help members of our team in their journey of self-leadership.

Some leaders are *conscious* of themselves, their personalities, idiosyncrasies, motivations and competencies, but they cannot *manage* themselves; especially their emotions and weaknesses. They lack self-control, lose their cool, become unusually critical, behave inappropriately, want to do everything, and are unable to keep their pride in check.

Great leaders begin with self-awareness and move to self-management, then proceed to other-awareness culminating in other-management, but there's an interactive effect among all four factors that is ongoing and in constant need of review.

Let's face it, there are two voices in our heads all the time. There's 'me' and there's our ego. And sometimes, if we're not careful, one of them will overpower the other.

Sometimes we have to be quiet. Sometimes we have to take the time to remember who we are and what we stand for.

I say to all of my clients that the first ninety days in any leadership role is the most important for us and our team. It is imperative to use the hours that make up those ninety days to reflect on how we are feeling, plan out how we will present ourselves to our team, and recognise and celebrate our past successes.

Serving ourselves is so important. If we don't serve ourselves, how can we serve others?

This is why the culminating principle in the Lead through Life Framework is *Service*.

While we will get to this in more detail later on, here is a simple explanation — *Service is all about how we love the people that we lead, and we can't do that unless we love ourselves first.*

We've got to be able to look in the mirror and say, "I love you," to the person who is looking back. If you find this too confronting, or the "mushy" factor is simply too high, start with "I like you" and work your way up.

To further strengthen our understanding of the importance of self-leadership, here are seven key reasons why it is so often the determining factor in the success or otherwise of a leader.

The Importance of Self-Leadership—Seven Key Reasons

1. It's about appreciating others

When we truly know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, we will appreciate others. Because leaders are anchored by an appreciation of our own dignity, we develop an appreciation of the aspirations, potential and dignity of others. This is how we transform the way we look at others.

2. It's about preventing derailment

Many hotshot, rising stars self-destruct and never achieve their early potential because of their lack of self-leadership. Daniel Goleman, in his extensive study on leadership derailment, points out, "When I compared star performers with average ones in senior leadership positions, nearly ninety per cent of the difference in their profiles was attributable to emotional intelligence factors rather than cognitive abilities."¹

3. It ensures long-term success

The temptation to push for higher sales or monthly targets at all costs can derail the leader. Unless leaders have a keen sense of self-leadership, they cannot stay focused on what's important. Great leaders have a long-term perspective on life and success and therefore only leaders who practise consistent self-leadership can ensure long-term success.

It is critical to make sure we are headed in a direction that will build our *life*, not just our feelings. A bad day or a bad week does not require a knee-jerk reaction that could ultimately knock you off course just because you're not where you want to be right now. Don't just look at how today has gone—look at how this month has gone. Is your trajectory correct? Are you on course? Then stay the path despite a setback. Your discipline in this area will lead to growth in other areas.

4. Leaving a legacy

All leaders leave legacies, whether good or bad. We leave our imprint on an organisation and the people in it through our beliefs, values and attitudes. Effective self-leadership is essentially about leaving a great legacy for the people we are leading. Legacy is not limited to money. It also includes good character qualities like *integrity* and trustworthiness.

5. Ask for help

Humility and vulnerability are powerful attributes and isolation exacerbates insecurity. Be willing to grow. Ask for help and listen to outside counsel. Seek out wisdom in areas where you need to grow. Ask without getting defensive. This should be a pattern in every key area of your life. It is in relationships where life flourishes. The more we draw away from it, the more our own mind and flesh will play tricks on us. Fight that instinct and push on.

6. The zone of the unknown

We only grow when we are at the edge of ourselves. Getting into the zone of the unknown is remarkably good for us at every level. It broadens our horizons. It sharpens our senses. Most

importantly, it causes us to pay attention. It's when that happens that we are open to and aware of new possibilities.

Think about times in your life when you have really grown—it wasn't through drinking wine and watching television on the couch. In nature, all evolution happens at the edges; close to death—when all other options have been tried.

7. Don't hold on too tight.

The more we open our hand, the more we can receive. In leadership terms that's not just possessions, or money. It could be time, experience, or joy. Live with an open hand. Practise being grateful for what you have. Look for who else could be blessed by what you already have. The more we sow, the more we will reap. Sometimes a leader must let go for the team or an individual to mature. As a parent, sometimes we need to let our children fail so they learn the lesson and grow to know that failure is only a lesson and no more.

Self-leadership is an ongoing process of self-reflection, it is not a one-time project by any means.

For twenty-eight years I didn't think that I had an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. I could run marathons. I could score in the top third of all military fitness tests and I could still operate and perform at a high level despite the fact that I was drinking a couple of beers, a bottle of wine and potentially a whisky most evenings. So for me, it was never a problem until I made the connection to self-love in 2018.

It was that often thrown-away phrase—"my body is a temple"—that saw me look at what I was putting into my body and decide to make a change. If my body was a temple, I needed to exercise, eat healthily and not drink so much. It took me almost three decades to come to that conclusion, but that was the snap-point. I realised that just because I began my adult years in a system of alcohol dependency didn't mean I had to be a slave to it forevermore. A conclusion like that is only possible through awareness followed by self-leadership.

Alcohol was an integral part of military life when I was part of both the Royal Air Force and the British Army. At the end of the very first day of military training, there is a "meet and greet" in the bar and this tradition continues every single day as it becomes inextricably linked with camaraderie. Alcohol is very cheap in the military and there is often no need to pay cash; we were billed at the end of the month. We would finish training or work, go to the bar, eat supper before going back to the bar at the very least being there for last orders.

In military sports competitions, the prizes were often cases of beer. On one occasion rather than charging my team for not signing out of the compound, we agreed that we would all be "charged" with buying a bottle of champagne to go towards the next dinner night. Of course, when setting this new ruling the first person who failed to sign out when leaving the compound was the Officer in Command—Me! Alcohol was deeply entrenched in my military life and, after a period of time, it was no longer about the socialisation and more about dependency. I know the British Army is actively seeking to change the culture however, I am more concerned about that same culture pervading to much of society. For too many of us, the drinking just continued throughout, and well beyond, military service.

I created a personal "333 Challenge" and began an online journal to chronicle my journey through 333 days of no alcohol. I chose not to go the full 365 days of the year and chose a nice, round figure of 333

days instead. I quickly realised there are two character types when it comes to indulging. There are the moderators and there are the abstainers. I clearly fall into the abstainer group, because once I made that decision to stop, I did. I had previously thought I was a moderator, but the knowledge that I could stop drinking for a week here or there without missing it reinforced the problem because I thought I had control over it.

There are many reasons why people choose to break a habit and it is only those with a strong intrinsic *motivation* who will succeed. For me, it was realising that I love myself sufficiently enough to recognise the damage I was doing to my body and mind by drinking heavily. The 333 Challenge has connected me with so many people around the world who are on their own habit-breaking path. Being someone who craves *service* in order to lead, these connections solidified my drive to continue beyond the initial 333 days. Discovering the existence of non-alcoholic gin and champagne has also been wonderful, but I must admit I do still miss the evenings when my wife Liz and I would sit on the deck with a glass of wine and chat about our day. What's happened since my 333 Challenge ended? I enjoy a glass of wine every now and again but have not returned to the dependency I previously lived with.

Self-reflection is essential to assess our strengths, weaknesses, values, and world view. Giving ourselves the space to do this every day is an opportunity to measure life—a little bit at a time—against principles and goals. Too often we neglect the most important person we will lead. The person we have the most care over, and the one who is the most critical to our continued growth and development. The first person we lead is ourselves.

In truth, any failure to lead ourselves well will cripple our chances of leading, helping, or disciplining others.

My daily reflection starts as soon as I open my eyes. As a part of my morning journaling I handwrite my mantra:

I appreciate this life every minute and will not waste today. I am happy, healthy, and wealthy. I live with bravery, tenacity and enthusiasm. I am an inspiration, honest, and present towards everyone I meet. I feel gratitude.

My intent is to live the values of my mantra. At the end of the day I check in; *how did I go? where did I achieve and where did I let myself down?* The next day, I start again. Over time I have got closer and closer to the actualisation of the person in my mantra; on some days I “bombed” spectacularly.

Take some time to write your own mantra. What values will you uphold—how will you grow into your best self?

Self-reflection has allowed me to crack open some underlying mentalities that I have subconsciously carried with me for my whole life without acknowledging that they existed. One of the biggest realisations was, *I don't do failure*. Being a high achiever, I always find a way. Throughout my military career, there was always another option and while success might not look like the success I expected, it was never a failure.

My definition of a failure—to give up!



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