

**"A leadership book that only surfaces once in every decade."**  
—from the foreword by DENIS WAITLEY, author of *The Psychology of Success*

# REAL LEADERSHIP

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**9** SIMPLE PRACTICES FOR  
LEADING AND LIVING  
WITH PURPOSE

A portrait of John Addison, a middle-aged man with dark hair, smiling. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light blue button-down shirt. The portrait is positioned on the right side of the cover, partially overlapping the title and the author's name.

**JOHN ADDISON**  
LEADERSHIP EDITOR OF **SUCCESS** MAGAZINE  
FORMER CO-CEO OF PRIMERICA

## Praise for *Real Leadership*

“This powerful, practical book is loaded with great ideas to help you achieve better results, faster, in any organization.”

—**Brian Tracy**, author of *How the Best Leaders Lead*

“John’s nine simple practices are straightforward and backed by real-life experience. His words will motivate you to lead and live with courage, honor, and integrity.”

—**David Bach**, author of the number one *New York Times* bestselling books *The Automatic Millionaire* and *Start Late, Finish Rich*

“A proven leader in the competitive world of financial services, John Addison knows how to build a great company. His new book is a fascinating and deeply personal account of three decades of success facing challenges and surmounting obstacles, filled with powerful anecdotes and inspiration from great leaders from the past.”

—**Lee Pollock**, Executive Director, The Churchill Centre

“John Addison is one of the greatest businessmen, speakers, and leaders of this generation. Not only has he pulled himself up by his bootstraps and achieved so much in his own business career, but he has selflessly devoted his time and energy to helping thousands of other people be more successful in their own lives. In this book he shares nine practical lessons that everyone, in any career or stage of life, can apply to be a more effective leader.”

—**Fran Tarkenton**, NFL Hall of Fame Quarterback  
and CEO of Tarkenton Companies

“Reading this book is like having John as your own personal leadership coach. The relatable stories and impactful practices in *Real Leadership* will motivate anyone who is leading a team. This book is just what anyone striving for greatness needs!”

—**Don Yaeger**, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Many people write and talk about leadership, few of which have demonstrated it, with extraordinary success, like John Addison has. If you want to learn real leadership, then read this book.”

—**Darren Hardy**, CEO Mentor, *New York Times* bestselling author, and former publisher of SUCCESS

“Some people talk about leadership, John Addison eats, drinks, and sleeps it! This book will give you purpose and a plan to lead the life you were meant to live.”

—**Jeffrey Hayzlett**, Primetime TV and Radio Host, Chairman C-Suite Network

“It takes more than a great business model for a company to be successful over the long term. At Baron Capital, we pride ourselves on discovering innovative leaders who can thrive in an always changing business environment. We found that leader in John Addison whose differentiated approach and execution through uncertain financial times resulted in Primerica being a top tier corporation. We would not have made the investment nor would the company have been as successful if not for John’s leadership.”

—**Ron Baron**, Chairman and CEO Baron Capital

“*Real Leadership* is a fascinating, stimulating, disarmingly candid, yet profoundly impactful book. John’s unique storytelling style makes his powerful points even more penetrating. Leadership is a vital ‘life force’ that every human being needs to master for every facet of their life and career. This book shows instead of merely telling. You will benefit from reading and living John’s advice.”

—**Jay Abraham**, world renowned business growth expert

“John lives and breathes *Real Leadership*. I’m proud to say I witnessed the stories and practices in this book firsthand. He led, he fought, and he served our team. Primerica wouldn’t be the company it is today without his leadership. Follow John’s simple practices to impact your team and produce *real* results.”

—**Glenn Williams**, CEO Primerica

“John Addison is more than a leader, he’s a coach and a motivator. If you want to lead your team and inspire others to great results like John has, *Real Leadership* is the book for you.”

—**Jack Canfield**, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Success Principles* and the Chicken Soup for the Soul Series

“True leaders inspire others to lead. John Addison is that kind of leader, inspiring the next generation of leaders using ageless wisdom, modern examples, and practical tools. Positive leadership is practiced, not inherited. And *Real Leadership* lights the way.”

—**Shawn Achor**, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Happiness Advantage*



“A must-read for those seeking to improve their leadership skills, manage people or situations better, or simply have a better perspective in life. As John’s colleague of 30 years and co-CEO of Primerica for 15 years in both the best and worst of times, I have seen his leadership principles in action. They work—pure and simple.”

—**Rick Williams**, former Co-CEO Primerica

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WITH PURPOSE

**JOHN ADDISON**

WITH JOHN DAVID MANN

Published in partnership with

**SUCCESS**



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# Foreword

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If you are reading this foreword, “Congratulations!” You have in your possession, a life-altering vehicle. If you internalize the contents that follow and apply the lessons learned with honest commitment, the timely and timeless wisdom offered will give you the change only a few readers experience through the pages of a single book.

Having devoted my career to studying leaders and winners in every walk of life, I consider it a privilege to add a few opening comments about John Addison’s extraordinary masterpiece. To write about leadership with authenticity and credibility, the author, of necessity, must exemplify—by his own actions—the critical traits that define true leadership. John Addison has lived the principles he shares with us in his unique, inimitable “home-spun” style. His warmth, humility, stewardship attitude and lack of hubris are legendary among all those, like myself, who have come to know his core values over a long period of time. Pure and simple, John “walks his talk.” He is the real thing, *sine cera*, without wax.

It is one thing to write a glowing, one-line testimonial about a colleague’s new book. It is another thing, entirely, to attempt to do justice to great book in the foreword. I realize that many eager readers skip the foreword and go straight to Chapter One. (I do that often, myself.) But if you are reading this, here is what makes this work one that only surfaces once in every decade, if that often:

It has been said that “the greatest teachers are themselves the greatest students,” and I can say, emphatically, that John is a lifelong student of what differentiates an empowering, inspiring leader from the command and control leader of the past. There are several major differences that make this book so relevant and special.

First, you must read and re-read the Prologue. It is the essence of the message. Print it and share it with everyone in your sphere of influence. The five lines that define John’s philosophy of living a life of purpose should be mailed or texted to everyone in the world with a smart-phone.

I don’t like to make comparisons, but, in this case, I feel compelled. This book, *Real Leadership: 9 Simple Practices for Leading and Living with Purpose* is as impactful as my late friend Stephen Covey’s global blockbuster *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. What excites me about *Real Leadership*, is that it is the story of a common man who becomes uncommonly successful by focusing on solutions to the problems we all face and by bringing out the best in everyone he encounters, which he refers to as “shining your light on others.” It is not about leadership theory as taught in Ivy League schools or in think tanks. It resonates with us, the readers, who are trying hard to believe that “things turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out.”

Each of the nine (9) simple practices, that are featured in the nine chapters, is a priceless gem in its own right. Together they remind me of a present-day, easily understandable version of the classic essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of my favorite philosophers. Addison encourages us to seriously engage in the action steps at the end of each chapter. While action steps are common to many self-help books in recent generations, I believe these are believable and achievable if we make the effort to convert these actions into a conscious, daily regimen. As

every Olympian I have trained has discovered, practice makes permanent. No train, no gain.

I have been up close and personal in observing John Addison's incredible journey for nearly thirty years. I consider him a colleague worth emulating and a lifelong friend. When you read this book, you will understand why.

**Denis Waitley**, author

*The Psychology of Success and The Psychology of Winning*

# Acknowledgments

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I'd like to say a heartfelt thank you to my parents, John and Ruth Addison, two of the greatest parents anyone could have. They gave me roots and wings not loot and things.

To my family, Loveanne, Kyle, and Tyler: God truly blessed me with a wonderful wife and the two best boys (now men) in the world. You have made me a blessed man.

To my business partner Rick Williams, my dearest friend and the greatest business partner anyone could ever have. You and I fought the fights, won the battles, and did something amazing together.

To my friend Glenn Williams, and the leaders and people of Primerica: You have impacted and changed my life more than anything I ever did for you. It was the honor of my life to serve you and our cause.

To my friends: I am truly a wealthy man because I have a wealth of wonderful friends who enrich my life every day.

To John David Mann and Amy Anderson: You guys captured my voice to make this book possible.

To Stuart Johnson and the SUCCESS team: Thank you for everything you've done. I love you guys.

To Dayna Stuckey, my Radar O'Reilly, thank you for everything you do to make my life work. By the way, what am I supposed to do today?



# Prologue

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If you were asked to identify the most precious resource in the world, what would you say? I know what my answer would be: *leadership*.

I believe leadership is the single most valuable, most important commodity there is—and the scarcest. Not oil, not land, not cash, not technological know-how, but tenacious, focused leadership. Leadership is everything.

There are many different styles of leadership. One of the most colorful leaders of World War II, with his brilliance and his ivory-handled revolvers and his ego bigger than a Sherman tank, was George Patton. Patton certainly got results. But I lean toward being more of an Omar Bradley kind of guy. General Bradley spoke quietly and wore a uniform so plain he was occasionally mistaken for a private. They called Bradley “the G.I.’s general.” He commanded 1.3 million men—the largest body of American soldiers ever to serve under a U.S. field commander, and he did a tremendously good job.

There’s no doubt that an autocratic, carry-a-big-stick leadership style—the kind that works through fear and intimidation—can be effective. However, if you want to be a leader for the long term, that approach generally doesn’t work out too well.

There is a leadership style that fosters not just results but purpose. The kind of real leadership that comes from an authentic concern and respect for those we’re leading. The kind of leadership that draws people to follow you even when they may

disagree with you because they trust you and know they can count on you.

If you want to lead people in that deeper way, in a way that achieves results without an oppressive game of who's boss, then you have to *inspire* them—inspire them to commit to a cause, to better themselves, to live their truest lives.

So how do you do that?

Well, you could just try to be as impressive as possible, inspiring people by your mere presence. I don't know about you, but that one doesn't work for me. Frankly, I'm just not all that impressive.

When I'm getting ready to go out in front of an audience and talk, there's not really any "getting ready" to it. I put a good deal of thought and preparation into what I want to say. But once it's time to show up, it's pretty much just go out there and talk. I'm not practicing my opening lines. I don't have a makeup artist. I've been in the green room before a lot of events, and sometimes it seems like the level of preparation people can go through is just unreal. With me, hey, how I look is how I look. I'm not thinking about getting my face made up or my hair sprayed into place or getting myself to look perfect. I don't have a speech on a teleprompter all lined out. I go out there with my Georgia accent and my imperfect sentences and my pages of handwritten notes—single words, a few phrases, the bare essence of what I want to get across—and then it's just me and whoever's out there sitting in those seats listening. Whatever I got, that's it. I'm not thinking about how the sizzle sounds; I'm focused on the steak. And it's not like I come out on stage and talk some noble high-flying philosophy and then go backstage and holler at people and throw things. What you see is what you get. I'm real.

The basic facts of my story are these:

At the age of 25, I went to work at a company where I never planned to stay for more than a few years. Over the following

three decades, I rose through the ranks, weathering ownership changes and executive leadership changes. Eventually, serving with Rick Williams as co-CEO of Primerica and surrounded by incredible leadership in our sales force out in the field, we took that company through the epicenter of the worst financial collapse in generations. The odds of our emerging intact, whole and healthy, were astronomically small, yet emerge we did, and we have seen our market cap double in the five years since.

You get up every day and aim to be a little better than you were yesterday.

This book is less a chronicle of exactly how that all happened than it is my attempt to show you *why* that happened. The Nine Practices highlighted in these nine chapters are a systematic breakdown of my approach to leadership, an approach built up over these decades from the examples of exceptional people I've had the good fortune to know. They are my best effort to give you a deconstructed recipe for real leadership.

My view is that you get up every day and aim to be a little better than you were yesterday.

You figure out what you're naturally good at, then focus on building those strengths and don't fuss about the things you're mediocre at. You work hard, try to be a person of generous spirit, and make your success about shining your light on the people around you, not on yourself. You do your best to develop enough likeability in yourself that you'll have people around you who are pulling for you instead of trying to pull you down. And when things get rough, as they will always do, you have the courage to stand firm—and then keep standing firm.

The five sentences you just read sums up what I've done throughout my life and my career.

I'm a normal guy who happened to find himself in abnormal circumstances. That's not false modesty. It's the plain truth. I've

worked hard to get where I got, always did well in school (Mom made sure of that) and graduated from college *cum laude*, got my MBA with honors—but from the University of Georgia and Georgia State University, not from Harvard or Stanford. I am not your Ivy League–bred, Wall Street–trained CEO from central casting. When I entered the business world, I was just a kid from an average middle-income family in Georgia. I like to joke that the first time I went into the boardrooms of Manhattan they had to bring in a Southern translator to understand what I was saying.

Let's just say, Gordon Gekko and I don't have all that much in common.

Don't get me wrong. The way things have worked out for me? That was no accident. I've worked my butt off and done my level best to do right by the people I've worked with. All I'm saying is that I haven't achieved what I have because I'm anything special or extraordinary or unique. I've had the great fortune of knowing some good people along the way who've taught me, through their words and even more through their actions, some fundamental leadership principles that have stood me well and steered me straight. These are my own personal laws of success. What they really come down to is *principles of living your best life*.

To me, the essence of real leadership is having the courage to live your true life, the one you were put here to live, and to do it in a way that makes the world a better place than it was before you got here.

We thought about titling this book *Personal Development for the Rest of Us*. Because I'm not going to tell you that to be a success, you have to get up every morning and work out for three hours, and then do your affirmations for another three hours, and then reread your goals list a hundred times, and then go out there and by the end of the day have every one of those

goals accomplished and ticked off that list. If that's what it takes to be a successful leader, then let's be honest: Neither one of us stands a chance.

Fortunately for you and me, that's *not* what it takes. You don't have to be some superhuman being to have out-of-the-ordinary success as a leader. Real, purpose-filled leadership is something we can all accomplish. I hope my story will show you that.

So here's the thing. I'm going to tell you my story—but as you read these pages remember that the point is not to tell the story for the story's sake. The point is to offer whatever experiences and perspectives I can in hopes that they may help you work out what *your* story is and muster the courage to live it full out.

Here, as I see it, is the bottom line: When it comes to carving out the life you were put here to live, achieving great success, and being a leader who inspires, there are only two things that really matter.

There's what happens.

And there's what you do about it.

Luck happens. Any truly successful leader who tells you luck had nothing to do with it is a liar. Whether you call it lucky breaks, good fortune, or Divine Providence, the plain truth is that circumstances will happen that are beyond your control and that change the course of your life, sometimes for the worse and sometimes for the better. You can't do a thing about it. It just happens. But that's not the whole story. It's not even the important part of the story. The important part of the story, the only part that honestly matters, is that second thing:

*What you do about it.*

Lucky breaks come by chance. Success comes by choice.

When people win at roulette, that's luck. When people win at life, it's not luck; it's because they learned how to meet circumstances head on and respond in a way that works—and that

works to the highest good. Does it help to be in the right place at the right time? Of course. But that “right place at the right time” shows up a lot more often than you might think. It’s not

Lucky breaks come by chance. Success comes by choice.

a once-in-a-lifetime thing. In fact, it happens all the time. Most people just don’t recognize it or show up to meet it when it does. The world is full of people who happen to be at the right place at the right time.

That’s not good enough. Winners do the *right things* at the right place at the right time.

The truth is that you don’t have to be brilliant, or exceptionally talented, or unusually lucky to be a leader who makes a powerful and positive difference. The truth is, you can achieve way more than people who are way smarter than you are, way more talented than you are, and even way luckier than you are, just by showing up, taking the right actions, working hard at it, and being an honorable person.

So yes, luck happens. Events shape your life. But there’s another truth, too. You can also shape events. Sometimes that takes courage, even a lot of courage. But just remember this: The courage to be yourself, to do the right thing and to devote yourself to making a positive difference in others’ lives, is all it takes to change the world. And that’s real leadership.

## A Note on the Action Steps

At the end of each chapter, you’ll find a summary of the “practice” associated with that chapter, and at the end of each summary I’ve listed a single ACTION STEP you can take to put that practice into operation.

You may have read books before with those lists of things to do, and if you're like most people, you may have said, "Hmm, sounds like a good idea," or, "I'll come back to that later." I want to encourage you to do something different this time.

This time, don't just read them.

This time, actually *do* them.

Real leadership, the kind of leadership that inspires, doesn't spring up all at once, fully formed, out of nowhere. It isn't born in a flurry of thunder and lightning, out of some amazing breakthrough or dramatic event, no matter how much it may seem that way from external appearances. Real leadership emerges over time as an expression of who you are and what you do every day. More than anything, it takes shape as a result of everyday practice.

These nine ACTION STEPS represent the distillation of everything I've experienced, witnessed, and learned in the world of leadership. If you take the time and initiative to actually put them into practice every day, I can make you this promise: They will change your life—and in your own way, in your own time, you will change the world.





# First Things First

## Decide Who You Are

Be true to yourself. Help others. Make each day your masterpiece. Drink deeply from good books. . . . Make friendship a fine art.

—JOHN WOODEN

**A**s a teenager, Benjamin Franklin spent hours studying editions of his brother's newspaper, *The New England Courant*, outlining the essays and then rewriting them in his own words. This was the same kid who as an adult would become the publisher of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, coauthor of the Declaration of Independence, and one of the most famous Americans of his, or any, generation. That was years in the future for the teen-aged Ben. He knew his older brother would never allow him to actually write for the *Courant*, so he composed his letters of social commentary in secret and signed them with the pen name "Silence Dogood." Ben snuck them under the front door of the newspaper office at night. A revolutionary man of letters in the making!

Then there was the young Steve Jobs, who was always tinkering with electronics. By the age of 14, he was already talking with Steve Wozniak about building computers together. Or the young Marvin Hamlisch, who at the age of eight told his father, "I want to be the next Cole Porter." Six-time Tony-Award

winner Audra MacDonald remembers as a little girl practicing Tony acceptance speeches while proudly holding her hairbrush as a stand-in for the award statuette.

These stories inspire me. I greatly admire people who knew their destiny practically before they could walk. I'm totally impressed when I hear about people who set their feet on the path of life early on with big, bold, ambitious blueprints for their careers.

I am not one of these people.

You hear about men and women who charted out their lives with amazing detail. "I want to be published by age thirty, climb Mount Kilimanjaro by age forty, have dinner at the White House by age 50. . . ." It amazes me when I hear stories like that. Apparently I'm just not wired that way. My approach to life has pretty much been to jump in the river and start swimming. When the river branches off, I just do my best to take the fork that looks like the right one.

Looking at where my life is today, I could never have imagined any of this happening 35 years ago, not under any circumstances. I'm the first to admit, I never had a grand plan for my life or master strategy for winding up in the leadership positions I've been in. The way I've always seen it is, you need to get up every morning, make this day an adventure, and do your best to be better than you were yesterday. Spend too much time fussing and worrying about where you're going to be 20 years from now and you might miss out on what you need to be doing 20 minutes from now.

Besides, I'm not sure life really works that way. Things happen that you can't plan. The future isn't entirely up to you. Big goals are great. I'm all for having a huge dream. There's an awful lot you can't predict nor control. What you *can* control is who you are and how you respond to the challenges that come your way.

If you're wondering about any early autobiographical epiphanies or moments of epic clarity that I may have experienced when I suddenly knew why I was here and what I was supposed to do with my life . . . well, there weren't any. I didn't have a clue.

Actually, that's not quite accurate. Looking back I can see that there *were* plenty of clues and hints along the way. At the time, I didn't know they were clues and hints. My plan, if you can call it *a plan*, was to keep putting one foot in front of the other and live in a way that would make my parents proud.

What you *can* control is who you are and how you respond to the challenges that come your way.

I'm not saying goals and dreams aren't important. They're incredibly important. There's something even more important—something that comes first. The first 25 years of my life were about getting a solid handle on that *what comes first*.

## My First Role Model

Over the years I've had quite a few heroes and role models, among them Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and especially Winston Churchill. I've had people who've worked with me side by side every day whom I also consider my heroes. I've had bosses from whom I've learned a great deal and I've had people who've worked for me who've taught me just as much. But the person who taught me the most and who I've most sought to emulate throughout my life and my career is my mother.

Ruth Dalton grew up in Moultrie, a farming community in southwest Georgia, with eleven brothers and sisters and

practically no money. The Daltons were farmers, scratching out a living off the land as best they could. For whatever reason, Ruth always had a strong independent streak in her character. She read a great deal and was always up on current events. After high school and college, she moved to Atlanta and took a job with the Georgia Department of Labor. There she eventually met a young man named John Addison.

I wish I could go back in time and observe my mom during those Atlanta years, when she was in her twenties. I have photos of her as a young woman. All dressed up, she looked like a movie star. I have a feeling that whenever she walked into a room, all heads turned. She must have just about sucked all the oxygen out of the place.

By the time she met my dad and got married she was already in her thirties. This was fairly unusual at a time when most women married and started families in their twenties. But she put the parties and big-city living firmly behind her and threw herself into family life with everything she had.

Although my father had a good job in Atlanta, where he worked for a textile manufacturing company called Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, my parents didn't want to raise me there. They'd both grown up in small towns and made a conscious choice to embrace the country life, even if that meant my father had to commute to work. They moved out to Covington, a little city about 35 miles southeast of Atlanta, and settled in a little rural community on the outskirts of Covington called Salem.

To give you a sense of where I grew up, the first five episodes of *The Dukes of Hazzard* were filmed in and around Covington. My *Cousin Vinny* was filmed there, too. Salem is a tiny place, which at the time had a general store, a filling station, a church (Salem Methodist, of which we were members), and not much else. It was a lot like growing up with Andy Taylor in Mayberry, except that it wasn't on television, it was our lives.

I remember going into Covington one day with my mom to do some shopping. This was 1961 or 1962. I would have been four or five years old. I was an only child, and although my mom had worked before I was born and would work again later when I entered junior high school, during those early years she wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. We were together a lot, and I often went on errands with her. On this particular day, when we approached the cash register to pay for our items, there was an African-American woman standing at the end of the short line in front of us.

You have to understand, this was the early sixties. The Civil Rights Movement was still young, and we were living deep in the heart of Georgia. At that time, in that part of the world, if a white person got in line at a store, an African-American person was supposed to step out of the line and let the white person go ahead of them. So it was no surprise, as the two of us stepped up to the line, to hear the checkout girl's voice saying firmly to the woman ahead of us, "Ma'am, you need to step out of line and let this lady in."

What happened next *was* a surprise, both to the checkout girl and to the woman in front of us. My mom immediately reached out to touch the woman on the shoulder and said, "No, no, no—you were ahead of me." And to the checkout girl she added, "I don't want to hear that. We don't do that."

I don't remember the other woman saying a word, but I'll never forget the look on her face. A mix of surprise, gratitude, and something I couldn't put a word to then, but if I'd known the word I might have called *dignity*. I watched that woman pay for her groceries, and as she left the store it seemed to me that she stood at least two inches taller than when she'd come in. Something about that brief exchange with my mom had changed something in her. With just a gesture and a few words, my mom had acknowledged the woman's sense of self-worth and helped it to shine.

As a five-year-old, I couldn't articulate all that or process any of it logically. But I got it. Five-year-olds see and understand a lot more than most people give them credit for. There was something thrilling about what had just happened, something that made me feel so proud of my mom I could have burst—and also made me say, somewhere down inside, “I want to be like *that* when I grow up,” even though if you'd asked me then, I couldn't have told you exactly what *that* was.

## Look for the Best in People

My parents and I were very close. I can't remember a single argument or fight ever taking place in our home. My dad does have a temper, though, and it can get away from him now and then if he's provoked. I remember times when he'd get upset about something someone had done and go on a rant about the person. Mom would just listen, nodding quietly, not saying a thing—at least not then. The next day, though, or maybe the day after that, the two of them would be sitting talking about some completely different topic, and she would suddenly bring up that person's name and mention something good they'd done. My dad would go quiet. Then she'd look over at him and give him a look. “You need to let that go, John,” she'd say. And he would. He knew she was right.

I wish I could say that, growing up in Salem, I always looked for the best in people the way my mother did, but it wouldn't quite be the truth. The best I can say is that it was the target I set for myself. Some of my most vivid childhood memories are of times that I fell short of that target and felt the sting of disappointment—not in others, but in myself.

They had a tradition in my school, where each kid would bring in a Christmas present for another kid in the class. But you didn't get to choose who you were giving your present to.

They would match us up by drawing our names at random from a hat. One year, when I was seven or eight years old, I got paired up with a boy named Gordon.

Gordon came from a family who clearly had no money. I don't remember what he gave me, but I do remember that it was something really small and seemingly inexpensive. It certainly was not very impressive. The other kids started making fun of him and his gift, saying it was cheap. Do you know the honest truth? I joined in with them.

Have you ever done that? Gone along with the crowd, even when you knew in your bones it wasn't the right thing to do? That's what I did that day. It didn't feel good, but I let myself be swept along in the moment and followed the herd.

When I got home from school, I showed my mom what Gordon had given me, and told her how everyone had reacted.

"Now listen, Johnny," she said. "That's probably all his family could afford. For them, that gift was probably more expensive than the present we bought you to give him."

I felt horrible about it. The idea that my actions had made somebody else feel bad, that I'd hurt someone with my carelessness, was something I just couldn't live with.

The next day, I searched Gordon out as soon as I got to school. I went up to him and thanked him for my present and told him how great it was and how much I liked it. My mom hadn't told me to do that. She didn't have to. Sometimes who you are speaks even louder than what you say.

I've never known anyone, then or since, better at not judging people, at turning the other cheek, at letting things go, at not participating in rumors or gossip, at always building people up and never tearing them down, than my mom. She exemplified the spirit of loving thy neighbor as thyself.

Me, I'm a little more wobbly. I try, but the truth is, we are all baskets of insecurities, mistakes, regrets, and other human

imperfections. I always admired how my mom would consistently look for the best in others. It took me a while to realize that it's just as important to look for the good in myself, too, and to focus on bringing those qualities out in myself as well as in others.

Leadership starts with leading yourself, which means accepting yourself with all your faults and imperfections, and not beating yourself up when you make mistakes. It also means not letting those dark aspects of yourself control who you *are* in the world, and making the decision to rise above those limitations. If you can do that with yourself, you can do that with others. Accept people's imperfections and be the first to see their good qualities; everyone has them. Be the kind of person others seek out for advice because they trust that you're not going to judge them; you're not going to throw rocks at them; you're not going to tell bad stories about them after you leave.

Leadership starts with  
leading yourself.

This is not to say you should be naïve and expect every last person to rise to your good expectations. Let's face it: There are some people in the world whose moral and ethical makeup is just beyond repair.

You do need to learn to recognize these folks and to steer clear of them, as much as your situation allows. But you can't let those few toxic people color your view of humanity as a whole. I would rather err by giving a person too many chances than by giving them too few. If I'm going to make a blunder, I'd rather do it in the process of giving someone the benefit of the doubt and trying to help them get ahead, than in holding them back or holding them down.

Will people disappoint you? Sometimes. People do stupid things. We disappoint ourselves; *we* do stupid things. No one's perfect, and I'm a long ways from it. But anyone can make a choice to be a person of honor and character.



## It's Not What You Do, It's Who You Are

There's a reason it's so important to have heroes when you're young: That's when you're still deciding who you want to be as you find your way into the life ahead of you. The people you admire most may not necessarily be those whose paths you will follow literally. Having Michael Jordan as a hero doesn't mean your destiny is to be a basketball star, admiring Lincoln doesn't mean you want to be a lawyer or politician. The point of heroes is not necessarily what they *do*. It's who they *are*.

Those early years in Salem taught me that it's worth it to work hard on being someone who delivers on what you say you'll do. Be somebody who people see walking by and think, *there's a man of honor* or *there's a woman of honor*.

In some ways, I *was* lucky. I wasn't born wealthy. I didn't come up through any kind of Ivy League or high-powered business dynasty. I didn't know anything about big-city life and was relatively unsophisticated as to the ways of the world. But I did have very positive and supportive parents who were excellent role models. In baseball terms, let's say, I was born on first base. It wasn't like I had to hit the ball and run to get there. My parents, community, and upbringing gave me that kind of solid head start. I'll always be grateful for that.

I've known people who grew up with wealthy, highly educated parents and all kinds of other advantages. You know the ones I mean: people who were born on third base and think they hit the triple themselves. And I've known people who had a mountain of misfortune to overcome in life—bad background, abusive parents, no money, no advantages—people born swinging at the plate with two strikes already against them.

But all of that is completely beside the point. It's all past; none of us is going to change any of it. You can't change your history. Things that are outside your control are outside your

control. Do circumstances matter? It would be naïve to say they don't. Of course, where you're born, where you grow up, who your parents are or aren't, where you're fortunate enough (or unfortunate enough) to go to school, all these circumstances and many others, play a role. But they're not what matters most. What matters most is what you do about it.

You may not be able to map out everything you're going to do in life. But you can decide what you believe in. You can find those things that you know are true, that you know you'll follow no matter what.

People don't follow what you say. They follow what you do and who you are.

The world of business tends to reveal your character. Sometimes you'll see smart and talented people burst on the scene like a shooting star, and then a few years later you're wondering why you're not hearing about them anymore. You

notice everyone saying, "Hey, whatever happened to so-and-so?" I'll tell you what happened to so-and-so. Their character caught up with them. I've seen this scenario replay itself over and over again, more times than I can count. You probably have, too.

Words truly are cheap. Anyone can talk a good line, and a good line may influence people for a time. But not for the long haul. Ultimately people don't follow your words. They follow your integrity, your spirit. They don't follow what you say. They follow what you do and who you are.

No matter who your parents were, where you grew up, what happened to you or didn't, the bottom line is that what kind of person you turn out to be is your decision. I don't mean a decision you make in one big burst of clarity on your eighteenth birthday, in an explosion of light with angels singing. It's a decision you make again and again, every day—in fact, dozens of

times a day. We describe ourselves as human beings, but I think the truth is more like this: We are human *becomings*. Being the kind of person others look up to and are glad to be around, the kind of person others will follow, isn't something that happens to you. It's something you decide, something you work on. It's not a gift. It's an ongoing project. And it's more than worth the effort.

When I graduated from Newton High School in 1975 a friend of my dad's gave me a copy of *Great Expectations*. Inside on the flyleaf he had written an inscription: "To Johnny Addison, for whom I have great expectations!"

Well, that made one of us. I sure appreciated the vote of confidence, but as for me, I didn't know what kind of expectations I had. If you'd asked me at the time what were my big goals in life, I probably would have said, "Um . . ." and who knows what would've come out next. The only things I *did* know were who I admired and what kind of behavior I wanted to emulate.

When people know from an early age what they want to do with their lives, I think that's awesome. But I don't believe it's the most crucial thing. I believe what's more crucial than what you do is how you go about doing it. I think what's important is to know what's important. The main thing in life is to know what the main things in life are.

By the time I left for college, I still had absolutely no clue what I wanted to *do*—but I had a pretty good idea of what kind of person I wanted to *be*.

## Answer the Call

Joseph Campbell said that every hero's journey starts with answering a "call to adventure." I believe that every one of us is a hero in waiting. Our call to adventure happens every day. At

the time, though, you may not realize that's what is happening, because that call may not look as dramatic in real life as it does in the movies. Sometimes it looks like simply taking the next step that's right in front of you.

In the fall of 1975, I left home to go study and live at the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens. I was not the least bit happy about it.

Mom and Dad had always raised me with the idea that I was going to go to college. I knew that's where I was supposed to be headed, but I honestly did not want to go. Things were great at home. I was happy there. I had a girlfriend who was still in high school. All my friends were there, most of whom were *not* going off to college somewhere. I had no desire to leave the house and make my way in the world. But all that was beside the point. My parents' bottom line was that I was going to college. That was non-negotiable.

So I went. Despite my initial reluctance, I absolutely loved it. College had a huge influence on me. It taught me how to think and gave me an environment where I could read fascinating stuff to my heart's content. I majored in economics and minored in political philosophy, which completely intrigued me. My interest in business had less to do with the nuts, bolts, dollars, and numbers of business itself and more to do with the human behavior of it all. I loved reading history and biographies, and still do to this day. I'd much rather pass a few hours reading about the life of some great statesman than poring over a business book.

As much as I loved my time in college, it didn't exactly clarify what kind of career awaited me. One of my economics professors, a man named Albert Danielson, wrote a letter of recommendation for me that concluded, "I expect Mr. Addison will likely wind up either with a doctorate in economics, or as the CEO of a public company." Dr. Danielson must have seen

something I didn't. I graduated from the University of Georgia *cum laude* with a B.A. in economics and not a clue what I was going to do with it.

I spent the next few months living at my parents' home in Salem and commuting into Atlanta every day, looking for work. The U.S. economic conditions weren't great in the fall of 1979, and it certainly was not the best time to be in the job market. Interest rates were through the roof and unemployment was high. I started interviewing for anything and everything I could find. I interviewed with United Airlines to be a reservationist. I interviewed with Atlanta Gaslight to work in their office. I interviewed with Equifax to collect consumer data. It was a completely rudderless experience. Eventually, I landed an entry-level job as an insurance underwriter at a company called Life of Georgia, starting out as a trainee at \$207 a week.

The fact was that I was not even the slightest bit interested in the insurance business. What I was interested in was getting an apartment of my own with some of my buddies. I didn't have any particular kind of employment in mind, as long as it was the kind that paid you something. If it would foot my share of the rent and subsidize partying on the weekends, that would do it for me. Insurance underwriting just happened to be what showed up.

Life turns on the smallest of decisions. You never know which ones will prove the most significant.

The moment I had my new job, I went in with two friends on an apartment in a community northeast of downtown, just inside the 285 loop, called Avondale—home to the nation's first Waffle House. The place was a dump. We had a sofa that was so bad it looked like a parody of bad college-dorm furniture. One day we drove by a dumpster and noticed a sofa sitting next to it that someone had thrown away. "That sofa looks better than

ours,” we said. So we went home, dragged our ratty sofa out to that Dumpster, made the exchange, and brought that other one back to our apartment.

If you had bumped into me at that time, you would not have seen a sign on my forehead reading “Future Chief Executive Officer of a Public Company.”

My new employment was a desk job, assessing risks. In other words, I was sitting all day in a chair, looking at pieces of paper. I hated it.

Wait, let me clarify that statement. It wasn’t just that I hated it. I hated it *and* I was terrible at it. I can’t sit at a desk for twenty minutes, let alone eight hours. Sitting there staring at files, literally all day long except for a lunch break and one other brief break in the afternoon, was sheer torture for me. I was making something like \$10,000 a year and doing something I hated and that I wasn’t any good at. I did it month after month, throughout 1980. I was learning the meaning of the word *job*.

I believe one of the great keys to a successful life is incremental improvement. It’s not about going from where you are today to moving into a mansion with five swimming pools tomorrow. It’s not about “quantum leaps” or the big dramatic breakthrough. Those are great for Hollywood films, where the filmmaker has only two hours to get the hero from Point A to Point Z. But back here in reality, where life’s major changes and plot points are measured in years rather than minutes, it’s about day-by-day personal improvement, finding your path to where it is you want to go, one step at a time. Exciting? No. Dramatic? Hardly. But it does have the advantage of being *real*. Over time it can, indeed, lead to events both dramatic and exciting.

And there’s the rub: time.

Incremental improvement doesn’t happen automatically, and it sure doesn’t happen swiftly. You have to commit to it over a lengthy period of time, and that takes a certain amount

of character and spine. A lot of people try to short-circuit the process by jumping around, zigging and zagging through life. They're too impatient, too unfocused, or too willing to follow the next shiny new idea that comes along. Tapping into the great power of incremental improvement takes patience, persistence, and faith. The payoff is well more than worth it.

Throughout 1980 it took every ounce of patience, persistence, and faith I had not to run out of the place screaming.

In 1981, two things happened that showed me it had been worth it to keep plodding along.

## Plug into Your *Why*

In early 1981, when I'd been working at Life of Georgia for about a year, they moved me into another department where I was enrolled in a management training program. I don't know if they did this because they saw some sort of potential in me, or if they just took pity on me and knew they had to get this yo-yo out from behind that desk. Whatever the case, I'll be forever grateful that they did it.

Tapping into the great power of incremental improvement takes patience, persistence, and faith.

For this training program, they brought in a consultant from Paul B. Mulligan and Company, out of Scarsdale, New York. The consultant's name was John Drago, and he changed my life.

John's task was to train a group of us in how to make departments more efficient. I liked him. He was smart and very personable. What's more, this efficiency stuff kind of intrigued me. I couldn't have kept on doing what I'd been doing for too much longer without going crazy or getting fired. I had no

passion for the work. My only motivation for showing up every day was paying for my share of the apartment, Dumpster sofa and all.

I liked the work we were doing in John's training. Under his direction, we started doing studies of different departments. Once a study was completed, one of us would have to stand up and present to the senior management our findings. Unlike some of the other folks in the course, when it was my turn I wasn't intimidated at all. As I started going through my slides and giving my talk, I noticed heads nodding in the audience. I thought, *Hey, I think I can do this!* It was the first time in my professional life I can remember having that thought.

Being moved over into John's program set another chain of events in motion.

These events would have equally far-reaching implications for my life. When Life of Georgia threw me a lifeline in early 1981 by pulling me out of underwriting and setting me up with John Drago, they also hired a young woman named Loveanne to replace me in my old job. Loveanne was smart as a whip, and I liked her a lot. Apparently she liked me, too. That spring we started dating.

Loveanne was the best thing that could have happened to me.

One Sunday, I brought her home to Salem to meet my parents and have lunch. I'd done this with several other girls I'd dated, but this Sunday the routine went a little differently. Halfway through lunch, my mom excused herself and went out to the pantry, quietly beckoning me to come join her. I went in and said, "Hey, Mom. What's up?"

She gave me a *now listen to me* look and said, "Johnny, you need to marry her."

As usual, I agreed with my mom. In the spring of 1982, a year after we met, Loveanne and I were married. It was one of the best decisions, probably *the* best, of my life.



Sometimes people experience dramatic events in their lives, turning points where something suddenly goes *Boom!* From that moment on, their lives change radically. I wonder, though, how often those moments really go *Boom!* Or do we see their importance only later on? For me, change has always seemed like more of an evolutionary than a revolutionary thing. In retrospect, I can see specific events and decisions that did in fact put me on a different path, like being placed in that program with John Drago. But they were seldom big, dramatic things that struck me as significant while they were actually happening.

Still, there have been a few times when things did seem to come to a head. These times are what you might call *defining moments*. One of those came right on the heels of getting married to Loveanne.

Coming out of college, I hadn't been super motivated or felt like I aspired to any great accomplishments. But things were different now. I became much more grounded and driven. It wasn't just that I was married; I was married to *Loveanne*.

Suddenly, I knew it was time to make a change. I was plugged into a whole new *why*.

For one thing, the commute just wasn't working anymore. After our wedding, Loveanne and I moved into a rental condo in Clarkston, a town right off the 285 loop not far from the apartment I shared with my buddies. Every morning we were riding into Atlanta together to go to work at Life of Georgia. This might sound romantic, but that's not exactly how it was working out.

I'm a wake-up-and-get-moving kind of guy, one of those people who is always saying, "Hurry up! Let's get going!" Loveanne, not so much. My wife is not a morning person. I expect you can see where I'm going with this. Loveanne and I pretty quickly figured out that if we kept driving in to work together, we would probably find ourselves in divorce court.

Of course, our commuting situation wasn't the real issue. Something bigger was going on for me. That bigger issue was something that's green and rhymes with *honey*. When I was living the single life, if I had enough cash for a good weekend coming up, I was good to go. Things were different now. We were married and starting to talk about raising a family.

One of my best friends from high school, J. Mark Davis, had also been a classmate at UGA, where he majored in accounting. Mark passed his CPA exam and got a job right out of college with Price Waterhouse over in Birmingham. (Mark continued to do well for himself. Today he is president of the Coca Cola Scholars Foundation and oversees millions of dollars every year in scholarships to high school seniors who exhibit strong leadership potential.)

Mark's success suddenly seemed terribly significant to me. It dawned on me that being the funniest one at the college party was no longer the principal metric of success. Now the scoreboard had to do with making a better income. Mark was pulling down more than \$20,000 a year. My best friend had a *good* job. I had *a* job.

And it wasn't just that. Something larger had changed.

Growing up as an only child, I'd always been very content to be by myself. I got along with other people well, but at the same time, being on my own was a state that just came naturally to me. Now that changed. For the first time in my life, I had someone else to think about. I wasn't just *me* anymore. Now I was *us*.

By this time, I'd been working at Life of Georgia for close to two years, and I knew I didn't want to work there for the rest of my life. Just having a job wasn't going to cut it anymore. I needed a *career*. I still didn't know exactly what I was going to do next—but I knew it needed to be something better than what I was doing.

I knew *why* I needed to do it.

## Keep Moving Forward

At the same time that John Drago was watching us and training us, I was watching him. I'd been looking hard at what John was doing—not just at what he was teaching *us* to do, but at what *he* was doing. These management consultants traveled; they dealt with people in lots of different situations; they got paid well. That all sounded like something I'd like to do.

I didn't think my particular mix of skills (whatever they were) lined up with any of the existing jobs there at Life of Georgia. I started thinking that maybe I could do what John was doing. So one day I sat down with him and asked him, what did it take to be a management consultant?

"Well, John," he said, "you have to go get yourself an MBA."

I took the GMAT to see if I even had a shot at it. According to the test results, I should give it a go. I decided to go back to school and get my MBA.

This presented a logistical issue. If I was going to go to school every evening after work, ideally I needed to be working somewhere closer to home so I could get home from work in enough time to have dinner and then ride the MARTA rapid transit downtown to Georgia State University to go to class. I decided it was time to leave Life of Georgia and get a job closer to my apartment—correction: *our* apartment.

I didn't know what kind of job, exactly, or where it might lead. All I knew was that the river was branching—and this seemed like the right fork to take.

One Monday not long after this I was home from work sick, sitting in our little living room in Clarkston and looking through the want ads in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, when I noticed one that read:

Rapidly growing insurance company looking for bright young college graduates.

Hey! I was young, and I was a college graduate. I wasn't completely sure about the "bright" part, but two out of three ain't bad. The position was described as "business analyst." Whatever that meant, chances were good John Drago's training had gotten me at least a little prepared for it. I'd already worked for an insurance firm for two years, so that had to count for something. The best part, though, was the thing that caught my eye in the first place: The company was located barely 10 minutes away from our apartment. I decided to apply.

The company was called A.L. Williams.

I went in, talked to their personnel department, and filled out an application. They offered me a job for \$19,200 a year. That was a good \$3,000 more than the \$16,000 I was making at Life of Georgia. And here was the clincher: They had a deal where, if you were working on a master's in business administration and you kept your grades at a B or above, they would reimburse your tuition. For Loveanne and me, that was huge. All I had to do was make sure I kept my grades up.

The next day, I went into Life of Georgia and turned in my resignation.

As I said, life turns on the smallest of decisions, and you never know which ones will prove the most significant.

The shaping events in your life, those moments that in hindsight prove to be crucial turning points, are often events that just seem to happen, out of the blue, the chance confluence of unpredictable circumstances. But the truth is that they don't "just happen." Most times, they happen because you're taking action in the direction of your *why*. You may not be able to plan the results, but that's okay. If you keep moving forward, focusing on incremental improvement, you'll put yourself in their path.

This is one of the most deceptively simple leadership principles there is: *keep moving forward*. People won't follow you if you're sitting in the corner sucking your thumb and talking

about how bad things are. They'll only follow you if you're going somewhere.

If you're sitting around waiting for something to happen, you're a stationary target for the bad things of life. A moving target is harder to hit. If you're in motion, then you're going somewhere, even if you're not sure exactly where that is. And as long as you're in motion, you can always shift your course. It's an awful lot easier to steer a car that's moving than one that's sitting still.

People won't follow you if you're sitting in the corner sucking your thumb and talking about how bad things are.

Waking up every day and aiming to be a little better than you were the day before is maybe what Campbell means by “answering a call.” I don't know. I've just tried to pay attention to what's going on around me and make the right decision about which foot to put where.

## Wrestle the Alligator in Front of You

There's a great saying in the military that applies just as well to life as it does to the battlefield: Every plan is great—until the first shot is fired. No one knew this better than Winston Churchill, who took office as prime minister of England in 1940 during a time of extreme crisis. Not only was the first shot already fired, but Europe had already been plunged into world war. Churchill's story is an epic tutorial in principled response to chaos and adversity.

“Plans are of little importance,” Churchill once said, though he also added, “but planning is essential.” (George Patton put it a little more bluntly: “A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week.”)

One of Churchill's great strengths—one among many—was his ability to hang tough and stay the course. Another was his fearlessness in taking immediate action when immediate action was warranted by the circumstances.

I've been to visit the Cabinet War Rooms, the underground complex where Churchill ran the war effort. His desk is still there, preserved in his office, and on it there sits a box he put there with a label that says, "Action This Day." Not an IN box. A TODAY box. Whether it was five in the afternoon or 2:30 in the morning, the prime minister was not leaving his desk until the last thing in that box got handled. I can't say I've always succeeded, but in my career I have sought every day to follow that example.

I may not be big on detailed long-term planning, but I'm very big on being in motion, in action, right now. I drive people crazy when they travel with me, because I never check a suitcase. I'll do a 10-day tour through Europe with nothing but a duffle bag. When we get off our plane, I'm not in the mood to wait around. For me, it's off the plane and go. When I go through that airport, I'm *moving*. Even if I'm not sure where I'm going, I'm going to get there fast.

A lot of people seem as if they're trying to avoid the present. Maybe they do this in the hope that if they just keep their eyes on a better future, then whatever's going on right now will sort itself out.

It won't. Whatever challenges or problems you're dealing with today, they are not going to get better with age. The only thing they're going to do with age is get worse. Here's my approach to problems: I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to form a committee to study it for the next 18 months. Whatever the problem or challenge is, I want to get it dealt with *today*. I believe you've got to get up every day and wrestle the alligator that's in front of you. And then move on to the next one.

There is a difference between a dream and a pipe dream. The difference is that a pipe dream isn't real. What makes a dream real is that the person dreaming it knows how to take action and deal with immediate problems, instead of sitting around waiting for someone else to deal with the problems or hoping they'll change on their own.

Go get it done. Quit talking about what you're going to do. Quit writing down what you're going to do, and go do it. Get after it. Go make it happen now.

As soon as word got around that I'd turned in my resignation, I was called into the office of a senior vice president by the name of Gerald Padgett. Mr. Padgett ran the New Business division. In fact, he'd been my boss when I was still in underwriting. So here I was, being called onto the carpet by my former boss. He was a man more than twice my age who had a heck of a lot more experience than I did.

"John," he said, "you're a bright young man. But you're making a dumb mistake."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. Maybe I could have pointed out that nobody at Life of Georgia was offering me an extra \$3,000 a year to stay on, but that didn't seem like a smart thing to say. So I didn't say anything.

Quit talking about what you're going to do. Quit writing down what you're going to do, and go do it.

"I honestly cannot believe you're doing this," Mr. Padgett continued. "They really like you here, in that training program you're doing. Stay with it and you'll end up in management. But that company you're leaving us to join? It's nothing but a fly-by-night operation. A few years down the road they won't even exist anymore. You're throwing your life away."

Was I throwing my life away? I didn't think so. In any case, this didn't feel like some major career decision because I didn't plan on being at that new job very long anyway. This was only temporary. I just needed a place to clock in and earn the rent while I went to school. Once I'd earned that MBA, I was going to go become a management consultant and join a big consulting firm. I was headed for a whole other career, right?

Besides, it *was* a lot closer to our apartment.

Mr. Padgett told me this place was a fly-by-night operation that wouldn't last much past the expiration date on my car's inspection sticker. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was a fly-by-night operation, and maybe it wouldn't last long. But that didn't bother me much. All I needed was for A.L. Williams to stick around long enough for me to get my degree, and then I'd be out of there.

Of course, things didn't exactly turn out that way.



**PRACTICE #1****Decide Who You Are**

Having goals and big dreams is important, but there's something even more important. It is something that comes first: deciding what kind of person you are. Even before you know exactly what you want to *do*, you can decide who you want to *be*, and live your life accordingly.

- Decide what you believe and who you are in the process of becoming. You can't change your background or your past. Ultimately, what kind of person you turn out to be is your decision.
- Look for the best in people and do what you can to bring that out in them. Look for the good in yourself, too. Focus on bringing those qualities out in yourself.
- Keep moving forward. Wake up every day and aim to be better than yesterday. Be willing to improve a little at a time. Incremental improvement takes patience, persistence, and faith. The payoff is more than worth it.
- Whatever issue is facing you, deal with it today. Don't wait. The only thing problems do with age is get worse. Let the future take care of itself. Focus on wrestling the alligator that's in front of you. Life turns on the smallest of decisions, and you never know which will prove the most significant.

**ACTION STEP**

List the top two or three people whom you most admire, along with what it is about them specifically that you seek to emulate in your own life.

