

# **PEAK** **LEADERSHIP** **FITNESS**

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*Elevating Your Leadership Game*

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**TIMOTHY J. TOBIN**

## MORE PRAISE FOR *PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS*

“A perfect read to support leaders for peak performance in disruptive times. Skills and theory are not enough! Let’s build leaders to be agile and fit to make our organizations survive and soar.”

—Elliott Masie  
Chair, The Learning CONSORTIUM

“If you are overwhelmed with the number of leadership books available and want one that will provide the best overview of what it really takes to be a great leader, start here. *Peak Leadership Fitness* is the perfect guide for first-time leaders, or anyone who wants to perfect their leadership skill set.”

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Co-Author, *Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go*

“The effort it takes to reach peak leadership fitness and peak physical fitness is amazingly similar. Both require you to set goals, persevere, work with a team, and follow a game plan. *Peak Leadership Fitness* spells out that plan for you and gets you to your peak!”

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Olympic Gold Medalist, Speed Skating

“Committing to your leadership development seems daunting and time consuming, but it is critically important to the success of your organization, especially the people on your team. Thinking about a leadership development plan like a fitness plan makes total sense, and *Peak Leadership Fitness* is a must-read to help guide you through the process.”

—Joe Del Guercio  
President and CEO, A. James and Alice B. Clark Foundation

*“Peak Leadership Fitness demonstrates how much endurance sport and leadership have in common and provides you with a practical how-to guide to help you take control of your leadership development.”*

—Rocky Harris  
CEO, USA Triathlon

“Anyone who helps develop leaders, employees, and teams will revere this book, which provides unique insights and practical approaches for elevating productivity and performance. We owe it to ourselves and our companies to be peak leaders, and Tobin teaches us how with a valuable set of useful tools and resources. We’ve got this!”

—Tamar Elkeles  
Chief Talent Executive, Atlantic Bridge Capital

*“Peak Leadership Fitness is the perfect combination of great leadership science and business-relevant wisdom. Tim has inspired me to approach my career and personal development in a whole new way.”*

—Walt McFarland  
Co-Author, *Choosing Change*

“Like athletes, leaders must constantly work at being fit—getting feedback, building their core, and jumping into challenging situations. Tobin says leadership requires an athlete’s dedication and commitment to ongoing personal transformation. Successful leaders—the kind who get results and create great workplaces—will agree.”

—Pat McLagan  
Author, *Unstoppable You*

“Tim Tobin has brought together two areas that require a deep commitment to growth and development. This book perfectly blends the discipline needed to become a better leader while maintaining your physical edge. Everyone will find this book to be a powerful motivator!”

—Steve Arneson, PhD  
President, Arneson Leadership Consulting

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*For Chase, Finley, Sara, and my Mom  
Thank you for your inspiration, encouragement, and  
unconditional love.*

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*Both leadership and fitness are a journey into self-discovery.  
Enjoy the journey and remember...anything is possible!*

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# INTRODUCTION

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Growing up, I was pretty active. I participated in a wide variety of sports—some formal, as part of a team, and others more casually. I never excelled at any one sport, but I could hold my own in many of them. Outside of team practices, I never really trained for anything. I always gave effort, but I didn't have focus. It's safe to say that in my youth I took fitness for granted. I had a solid foundation of capability and fitness, but did not develop good, sustainable habits. That would eventually come back to haunt me, but my response would come to define me.

Flash forward to my late 20s, and my fitness as I once knew it was gone. I had gained weight and lost stamina. It seemed as if my fitness had disappeared in the blink of an eye, but it was really the result of years of neglect. I had gotten sidetracked by life: Education. Career. Friends.

When I was 29, my friend Cady suggested that a group of us run a 10K race together. Many years prior, the thought of running 6.2 miles would have been no problem. But things had changed. I had changed. Not wanting to turn down the opportunity, I signed up and began to train. I found running six blocks a challenge, let alone six-plus miles, but I was determined to run the race.

I still remember race day. It was a crisp December morning with gray skies. It was a themed run, and many participants were dressed as elves, reindeer, presents, or Santa. Not me. I'm not much of a costume person on a normal day, much less when I am trying to run a race.



At the starting line, I was completely dialed in to the task ahead. I heard the starting gun go off and shuffled forward with all the other runners. Off we went. Less than halfway through the race, however, I realized there was a problem and told my friends to go ahead at their pace. I hadn't properly trained, and I was absolutely hurting—feet, legs, lungs. Everything. One way or another, I knew I had to get myself across that finish line. I can tell you, it wasn't pretty. I walked a good bit. And when I wasn't walking, I did something only vaguely resembling running. But, somehow, I managed to finish.

When I finally made my way across the finish line, the cheering crowd had long since dispersed and the volunteers were cleaning up from the race. My friends were worried something had happened to me.

Not my best moment, but I finished the race. As I look back on this event more than 20 years ago, I can see that it was a turning point for me. I still remember coming down that home stretch seeing volunteers sweeping the cups off the street. Rather than being proud for finishing, I was mad at myself. How could I have let myself get so far from what I was once capable of? Why didn't I train harder? Before I crossed the finish line, I vowed: Never again.

I learned a lot about myself that day. I let that disappointment sink in for about a month or two before concluding that I really needed to step up my game. No longer would I take my fitness for granted. I signed up for a marathon. You may be thinking that was a bit extreme, and perhaps it was, but like I said, I was mad at myself. I wanted a seriously ambitious stretch goal to force myself into action.

This time I trained properly. And you know what? It was actually easier for me to complete the marathon than it was to finish that 10K race. And a marathon is more than four times longer!

I learned that it all comes down to preparation. I put in the time and effort necessary to be at my best. And my best was all about finishing the marathon in good (not great) time. I wasn't competing to win. I was competing with myself to do the best that I could. Finishing was a big part of that, and it has helped me calibrate what I was capable of. I kept training for marathons and also expanded into triathlons

and other extreme and no so extreme sports. At the time of this writing, I have completed more than a dozen marathons and six Ironman triathlons. I have developed a fitness mindset, and it has become part of who I am.

From time to time, I am asked why I do such extreme fitness activities. What drives me? For the record, it's not because I'm still mad at myself for that 10K. I stay active for three reasons.

First, I am driven by potential and possibilities. I want to know what I'm capable of, and that requires stretching the boundaries from time to time. I also want to show others what is possible and inspire them. When I look back on my life, I want to know that I gave it my best and inspired some people along the way. The reality is, we don't know what we are capable of until we take that first step.

Second, I love fitness for the learning aspect. There are some great life lessons to be learned from sports. In fact, every time I train for or participate in an activity, I learn something new about myself, be it something to do with my nutrition before or during a race, something about my pace or my preparation, or perhaps something as simple as the fact that I can accomplish this goal. I have grown on so many levels since starting this journey. I've gained a better sense of goals and focus. I am more comfortable operating out of my comfort zone. I even look at seemingly insurmountable challenges differently.

Third, I want to have a healthy lifestyle for my wife and kids. I hope I set a good example for them and make them proud. I have found that the more fit I am, the more engaged I am with the most important people in my life. I have more energy, not less.

You've no doubt heard the saying that it is the journey, not the destination, that makes it all worth it. For me it's been both. I'm proud of the destinations I've reached and grateful for what I've learned along the way.

During both my preparation for an event and the event itself, I will undoubtedly face some unexpected challenges—a flat tire, a leaky goggle, or a muscle cramp. I have come to rely on my mental toughness and ability to push through such obstacles, but I'm not sure if I've

always had that ability. Or maybe it's evolved with age and knowledge. The more we overcome, the more we stretch our comfort zone and boundaries. What was once thought impossible becomes possible. No matter what my time is when I cross the finish line, I feel a tremendous sense of pride and joy—not just for the accomplishment itself, but also for all the arduous work and sacrifice that went into it.

Along the way, in both leadership and fitness, I have learned that preparation determines outcomes. Know that I am not advocating for you to run a marathon or do an Ironman. Your fitness decisions—much like your leadership ones—are highly personal. What I am saying is don't sit still. Take that first step. Take whatever next step you are comfortable with, or perhaps slightly uncomfortable with. You may surprise yourself!

Leadership and fitness make a powerful combination. They will both take you on a journey of self-discovery. Both require self-awareness and preparation to be at your best. They require passion and commitment. Both can inspire others. They provide an opportunity to test yourself under pressure. Both will keep you humble. No matter what you are capable of, you are frequently reminded that you are human.

Self-awareness and training will absolutely make a difference in how well you do and how prepared you are to respond when things don't go as planned. And there will be many times things don't go as planned. I've had my share of those days. In fact, that 10K story could have just as easily been about a professional situation in which I was unprepared as a leader—one in which I went in overconfident or didn't prepare properly.

Over the years, as I've worked with athletes and leaders, I have developed a set of four guiding principles. They are easily stated yet difficult to embody. They cover the full cycle from idea or goal to accomplishment, and include the approach needed for the uncertainties and challenges encountered along the way. Throughout this book, I'll share leadership and fitness vignettes based on these principles and how I've seen them come to life:

- **Principle 1.** You never know what you're capable of until you take that first step.
- **Principle 2.** You must put in the effort.
- **Principle 3.** You learn more about yourself when times are tough. (In other words: Never give up.)
- **Principle 4.** What you consume matters.

## At the Intersection of Physical and Leadership Fitness

You may be wondering, “What does all this have to do with leadership?” I’ve applied and shaped these principles throughout my leadership journey. Each one aligns with what it takes to be at your leadership best. I have seen them come to life in countless other leaders I have worked with, as well as learning from my own experience.

When I think back to the first time I was a leader, it does not conjure memories of excellence. I was 27 years old and through tenure and attrition had become the second-longest serving person on my team. There were 20 people on my team, many of whom had become my friends over the years. That alone presents its own set of challenges, but I was not prepared for them or the responsibilities of leadership.

*Not prepared.* That is the exact same condition that contributed to my first dismal 10K performance. The result was similar. I was nowhere near my peak and I was disappointed in myself.

Unfortunately, unlike the 10K, this time my lack of preparation affected others. If there is one significant difference between fitness and leadership, it is the direct impact you have on others if you neglect it or get it wrong. The stakes are much higher with leadership, and therefore the actions you take are that much more important.

Looking back, I didn’t trust the team, hadn’t earned their trust, and had a command and control mentality. I was always looking for that gotcha moment. I was in over my head. And much like the 10K, my performance was built upon a shaky foundation at best. I had no idea what it meant to lead others. I hadn’t trained or consumed anything related to leadership. I’d never read a leadership book, taken a course, or shadowed a seasoned leader. I didn’t have a mentor. I just showed up.

It wasn't until eight years later as I was preparing to take on my next leadership assignment that, upon reflection, I realized just how poorly I had done in my first role as a leader and the impact my leadership had. It wasn't all bad, but I still cringe when I think about how I acted back then.

For me, taking that first step meant realizing that was not the type of leader I wanted to be. Beyond that, additional effort was required. It is equally important to know the type of leader you *want* to be, and for me that ideal has evolved over time. An important lesson, though, is not to underestimate the power that clarity and focus have on performance.

This time around I was determined to be a better leader—more focused, trusting, and supportive. My team was smaller, at six, but it had more visibility, significance, and complexity because of its cross-functional nature and project types. I had now taken several courses, read some books, and even had two highly respectable leader role models I could look to for advice—both of whom I still admire, respect, and consult today. My experience in that leadership position was still far from outstanding, but it was much improved in terms of overall team engagement and outcomes.

But leadership is about people. And, just like reading a book about marathons will not help you run faster, books and courses alone aren't likely to make you a great leader. It takes observation, practice, and reflection.

However, at the time I thought I had leadership figured out. I continued leading smaller teams until my next big step and major learning opportunity as a leader came, when I was given the responsibility of leading a team of more than 25 professionals. I set a vision, met with my team leads regularly, and provided guidance and direction, and we delivered meaningful results.

Unfortunately, we don't know what we don't know. And what I didn't know was that I hadn't truly embraced the people aspect of leadership. I was simply leading how I wanted to be led: giving direction and providing autonomy. It wasn't until I received feedback from a

360-degree assessment that I learned that my style didn't resonate with everyone. The feedback was generally quite positive, but I also learned that a few people on the team preferred a more involved style.

As leaders, it is our responsibility to help others be their best and meet them where they are in terms of style and support—the essence of servant leadership. This time I learned about the importance of perceptions, knowing how you are showing up as a leader, the value of others' perceptions, and the subjectivity of leadership. The reality is that leaders are only as good as others think they are. This insight helped me understand the importance of leading how others want to be led, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach based on your personal preferences.

I learned firsthand the value of self-awareness for being at your best. In fact, I think self-awareness should be the starting point for all personal growth and development. Otherwise, how would you know what to work on? As a leader, learning should be continuous. Once you realize that you've never fully and truly arrived—which is an endeavor requiring ongoing effort—that is when you are on the road to being at your leadership best.

I wish I knew earlier what I know now. It's true of my leadership journey, and I have heard the same from countless leaders and athletes. We all wonder just how good we could have been with the right preparation and focus—and the right training.

Whether athlete or leader, some accept that their best days are behind them. However, those who realize their story is still being written have the opportunity to change, to elevate their game, and to reach their personal best. Those are the people who realize that destiny is written not for us but by us.

## About This Book

I wrote *Peak Leadership Fitness: Elevating Your Leadership Game* to share the lessons I've learned along the way at the intersection of physical and leadership fitness. Like physical fitness, your journey to peak leadership fitness begins with a commitment and requires action. It is not a single, discrete activity. It is a mindset of continuous improvement. This book

will help you identify where to get started and which activities will guide and support your ongoing journey toward peak leadership fitness.

This book is not just about my firsthand experiences in fitness or leadership. I have had the opportunity to work with and learn from many others, and the parallels amaze me. Additionally, the book is grounded in adult learning and development and leadership research, such as Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner's *Learning in Adulthood* (2006), Merriam and Bierema's *Adult Learning* (2013), Knowles' *Self Directed Learning* (1983), Knowles and Holton III's *The Adult Learner* (2015), Greenleaf and Spears's *Servant Leadership* (2002), Burns's *Leadership* (2010), and Bass and Bass's *The Bass Handbook of Leadership* (2008).

## Who Is This Book For?

If you want your leadership development to be transformational for you and those you lead, then this book is for you. *Peak Leadership Fitness* is not about checking a box. The leadership development industry is booming, and there is no shortage of opportunities for your development. But checking the box rarely leads to meaningful gains, much less peak leadership fitness.

I wrote this book to help you decide where to start and how to make the most of your often-scarce, yet important resources: your time and money. We'll discuss different areas to focus on to help you work toward your peak leadership fitness—from taking your pulse and building your foundation to reinforcing your leadership strength, flexibility, and endurance. I've applied proven practices to help you identify low-cost, high-impact activities that will give you the best results.

There are many reasons (that is, excuses) for not striving for peak leadership fitness. The most common ones I hear are, "I'm too busy" or "I don't have the money or organizational support." Unfortunately, I don't see that reality changing anytime soon. This book is designed to help you combat those excuses and take control of your leadership development.

I tend to interpret these excuses as really meaning, “Leadership isn’t a priority to me.” However, I guarantee you that it is important to those you lead. I believe that if something truly matters, you will find a way around anything that is standing in your way.

I wrote this book for those of you who truly care about leadership, but just don’t know where to turn to be at your best. For those of you who want to have greater control over your development and realize results, I wrote this for you, too.

More specifically, I wrote this book to help emerging and mid-career leaders establish good leadership fitness habits earlier in their careers. Rather than focusing on a select few, I want to introduce meaningful, high-impact, low-cost leadership development for anyone who wants a higher level of leadership expertise. That means no more excuses.

Regardless of where you are in your career, it is never too soon or too late to focus on your leadership fitness. If you are in the early or middle stages of your career, this is about building good habits to stay at your leadership best. If you are at a later stage of your career, this is about defining, or redefining, your legacy, re-energizing your leadership, and developing future leaders. It requires taking that first step and knowing where to focus your efforts to get the best results.

Another important audience for this book is anyone responsible for developing leadership programs within their organization. I have been fortunate to lead teams responsible for developing numerous award-winning leadership programs. Those programs were built based on the same guiding principles that I’ve incorporated into this book.

## **Getting the Most From This Book**

Think of *Peak Leadership Fitness* as your personal trainer or coach. Personal trainers and coaches customize the routine for their clients. They meet them where they are in terms of fitness and abilities. This book is no different. It can help, but you’ve got a role, too.

I designed this book to meet you where you are in terms of your development needs, interests, goals, and preferences. Like a fingerprint, no two leadership fitness plans are exactly alike. Just as you wouldn’t go



to the doctor's office and expect the same treatment as another patient with different symptoms and medical history, the same leadership development activities should not be prescribed for everyone.

The book is divided into two parts—Foundations of Fitness (chapters 1-3) and Steps to Becoming Leadership Fit (chapters 4-7). Here is a closer look at what you'll find in each chapter:

Chapter 1 defines leadership fitness; chapter 2 delivers the fitness principles, which is the motivational starting point; and chapter 3 discusses the leadership mindset—what it is, why it is important, and how to develop yours. Chapter 4 is about establishing a baseline of self-awareness as well as a personal leadership development plan. Chapter 5 helps you think about which leadership skills to focus on and how to build upon your foundation of knowledge. Much like exercising to elevate your heart rate, the focus here is on elevating your knowledge base. This chapter also introduces you to the four knowledge zones for developing your leadership capabilities. In chapter 6 I highlight the best ways to learn through practice. And in chapter 7 I focus on how to best build your leadership endurance, including the roles of feedback, reflection, and establishing good leadership development habits.

As you read through each chapter, think about which approach to development best suites your needs, resources, and preferences. You can be flexible about which activities you incorporate into your plan. For example, if you don't have access to mentor circles or if job shadowing is not an option in your organization, it's OK to focus your attention on a different type of activity.

Throughout the book, I incorporate multiple tools that reinforce the concepts and vignettes that show the concepts applied in a relatable and practical way. Each chapter also includes fitness tips that are intended to be microbursts of information to help you get the most out of your development activities. You'll find a complete list of these resources in the appendix.

One additional tool I include is a cost-impact matrix of development opportunities. The two biggest challenges most leaders face when it comes to their development are limited resources (time and money)

and not knowing where to start. This tool provides a framework to help you make decisions and prioritize the development activities that meet your specific needs. It is not meant to be an exact science, with detailed calculations for every possible activity. Rather, it is based upon my years of experience, coupled with some assumptions. The primary assumption is the phrase *when done well*. Throughout this book, I map activities to the matrix with the assumption that they are done well. Actual costs and impact will vary, based on how the activity is implemented, who is involved, and the support you have. Your perspective on an activity may also vary, and that is to be expected. Consider my perspective and activity mapping as a starting point or guide, and place additional emphasis on your experience. The matrix itself is meant to initiate your thought process, to help you determine where to start with your leadership development and how to incorporate the best low-cost, high-impact activities into your development routine.

Cost refers to both the direct and indirect costs associated with an activity. Specifically, cost is about time and money. Impact is about the types of results you can expect to get from the activity relative to making a difference for yourself, those you lead, and your organization. When it comes to leadership development, higher costs do not always (or even often) yield the best results. Similarly, I am not suggesting you should always go for the low-cost option.

This would be a very short book if money and time were no object. I would tell you to hire a leadership coach to guide you throughout your development. It's not a coincidence that those same high-cost coaches would have you run through a similar set of steps outlined in this book. I would encourage you to have them there for you every step of the way to help you focus and to challenge you, just as a personal trainer would do in the gym.

For most leaders I work with, though, that's not a realistic option. Time and money matter, and so do results. This book's real benefit is that it acts as a guide who is there with you every step of the way—to help you make decisions that are right for you in terms of the cost and potential impact the activity can have. The goals and actions are up to you.

# PART I

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## FOUNDATIONS OF FITNESS

In physical fitness, we learn some basic dos and don'ts—some rules for ourselves: Exercise limits. How to prepare for an event. How to evaluate our progress . . . honestly. How not to kid ourselves. And how to plan our fitness routine and actions in the short term and the long term.

It's really no different when reaching your peak leadership fitness. In Part 1, you'll learn how to be honest with your leadership self, take the first step, navigate the tough times, persevere, properly prepare, and develop that killer mindset. All according to the Tobin Four Fitness Principles.

## WHAT IS PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS?

Are you leadership fit? I'm not asking whether you can run a mile, do an hour of hot yoga, or do 20 push-ups. Being leadership fit is about being at the top of your leadership game. It requires great balance of both the people and task aspects of leadership. You must be focused, engaged, and adaptive while delivering positive results. It's about your performance and ongoing personal improvement. It requires you to take an active role in incorporating ongoing development to continuously develop your leadership skills. And it's about being transformational—both for you *and* for those you lead.

### **Peak Leadership Fitness**

An aspirational state built upon consistently striving toward exceptional interpersonal and technical skills, adaptability through learning, and consistently positive results. It is built by balancing capability, capacity, and mental toughness. It is accomplished through strong and accurate self-awareness and a combination of relevant activities as part of a regular development routine. Peak leadership fitness allows you to bring your full and best energy to your leadership.

Peak leadership fitness is dynamic and aspirational because once you realize your potential and achieve your goals, you have a new platform, or baseline, on which you can continue to learn and grow. I think that is great news, because it implies you already have a starting

point for your leadership fitness, with the potential to further elevate your leadership. It also implies that you have far greater and ongoing potential for growth.

Leadership fitness requires physical energy, emotional connection, and mental toughness. It is about capability and capacity. Capability comes from your knowledge and skills, while capacity comes from your energy and engagement. This all needs to be balanced with mental toughness and a leadership mindset. Your mindset evolves from experiences, feedback, and reflection. The best leaders can effectively manage these attributes and continuously evolve through self-awareness, feedback, and reflection. Peak leadership requires active participation and planning.

So, are you working toward your leadership best? Are you bringing your best energy to your leadership? Are you taking the necessary steps to achieve your peak leadership fitness? If you're not striving for peak leadership fitness, you may not be working out as a leader.

## Two Challenges Facing Today's Leaders

I have worked with, coached, and taught many leaders during my career, and I've found that they face two critical challenges when it comes to their development:

- **Challenge 1:** Today's leaders do not have enough time to focus on development. There are simply too many demands, and development doesn't just take a back seat—it often rides in the trunk. This is particularly evident with more seasoned leaders who often have so many priorities that leadership development rarely rises to the top. Unfortunately, with the increasing focus on results and demands on leaders' time, this is only going to become more challenging.
- **Challenge 2:** Many leaders don't know where to start. This is further exacerbated by a crowded leadership development landscape. It has become increasingly difficult to make sense of which activities will yield the best results. Consequently, many leaders become passive participants in their growth—waiting for someone else to serve up their development.

Some leaders do nothing when it comes to their development, or worse, they invest their valuable time and money on the wrong activities, which includes anything that does not help reinforce or improve leadership. This can be costly both financially and in terms of misdirected effort and results.

Much like your physical health, when it comes to your leadership fitness, what you consume matters. You will not stay healthy by fasting for extended periods or consuming the wrong things. The implications extend beyond time and money to include performance and engagement. It is too easy for leaders to build unhealthy habits around their development and become disengaged from their own growth and performance. The most common unhealthy habit I see leaders engage in is inattention to their development. Most people realize they should focus on their fitness (both leadership and physical), but other priorities often get in the way. Life gets in the way. Over time, this takes its toll and performance suffers.

Let me transition to some good news. Leadership development does not need to be expensive or overly time consuming. Much like your physical health and fitness, though, it cannot be ignored or neglected. You must take action and build good habits. In the introduction, I described four fitness principles, which I'll discuss further in the next chapter. The first fitness principle states that you must take the first step. And that step should be well thought out as to your goals, your resources, and what will give you the best results.

## **Why Should You Be Leadership Fit?**

Great leadership is not about you; it is about those you lead. A key aspect of leadership is engaging and motivating the people you lead. Unfortunately, low engagement has reached epidemic proportions. There are multiple studies that show that a significant amount of employee engagement—up to 70 percent in some cases—can be attributed to a person's leader. This means that if we can get leadership right, we'll have a real chance to create an engaged workforce. This becomes a force multiplier, too, where your actions inspire multiple people to strive to

be their best and bring their best energy to what they do. Now that's the type of organization and team I want to be part of.

However, there is much work to be done when it comes to engagement. Many of those same studies that highlight the importance of leadership to drive engagement also show that as little as 15 percent of employees feel engaged. That is a huge gap with significant implications. When you factor in the lost productivity and associated turnover costs, the implications of low engagement quickly add up.

#### FITNESS TIP

Great leadership is not about you; it is about those you lead.

Becoming leadership fit is a major step toward bridging the engagement gap by inspiring those you lead. I have seen this firsthand. People want to connect with a vision. They want to be energized by their leaders. Members of those teams have a tremendous amount of initiative, effort, and commitment. Leadership expert Steve Arneson offers up a profound question that has stuck with me: Do you want to be known as the type of leader who does something *to* those you lead or *for* those you lead?

## Make Your Leadership Development Transformational

Dave was a product manager at a large global technology organization. He told me that during his annual performance review, his boss said he needed to work on his leadership skills. Dave was completely surprised by the feedback, and wasn't exactly sure what that even meant. He thought everyone already liked him.

I told Dave that leadership is not about being liked. It is about setting a clear direction, motivating and inspiring people, and developing them. It is about bringing out the best in people and getting results. Dave said he had never thought about it that way. In fact, he said he hadn't given it much thought at all. However, Dave knew he needed to improve or his career opportunities would be limited.

Dave's response to my next question would have a profound effect on the direction we would take and the results he ultimately achieved.

"Are you looking to 'check a box' or do you want this to be transformational?" I asked.

To his credit, Dave paused, thought about it, and then said he wanted this to be transformational. I could see that Dave was eager to get started right away, but he had no idea where to begin.

What Dave didn't know was that he had already begun. He recognized he needed to improve and described the type of leader he wanted to be: one who provides vision, direction, and feedback, and who develops future leaders. Stating his intentions was the easy part—akin to having a New Year's resolution. Bringing it to life was going to take commitment and effort.

Dave and I immediately began to outline our plan of attack using the same plan in this book. With his boss's support, Dave completed a 360-degree assessment that included input from Dave's current boss, a former boss, six of his peers, his three direct reports, and four other colleagues. Dave was careful to select people that he knew would give him honest, candid feedback.

When his results were ready, Dave was nervous. "I have no idea what to expect with these results," he told me. "I didn't sleep well last night thinking about what people might have said about me."

I reminded him that this was an opportunity to see how he was being perceived—positively and negatively—and that it was better to be aware of this than not. "Awareness doesn't change the perception; it drives action."

Dave's feedback covered a wide spectrum of responses, and although generally positive, he was discouraged by some of the comments. He skimmed right over the positive ones, but lingered on the negative, such as, "Dave is often unapproachable" and "There's a lack of direction under Dave."

Feeling defensive, Dave explained that he was busy working on an important new product development, hence his closed door, and that he thought everyone knew what their responsibilities were.

Then he paused, realizing that his defenses would not change these perceptions. He even admitted that he could get so focused on his projects that he walked right by his team without even acknowledging them,



only realizing what had just happened after the fact, if at all. Once Dave accepted the feedback, we worked on a plan to capitalize on his strengths and improve a couple other areas.

Dave's plan included a steady yet balanced diet of activities, such as mentoring two recent hires in other departments to share his business knowledge and shadowing Brenda from the marketing department, who was regarded as an amazing leader with high emotional intelligence, strong marketing acumen, and acute strategic planning skills. Dave was an active participant in the shadowing relationship, asking many questions while also providing insights of his own. His experience with Brenda became transformational and helped him in ways he hadn't imagined.

In fact, the experience turned out to be mutually beneficial. Working with Dave helped Brenda see more clearly how and when disconnects occurred with her own staff. While she wasn't that enthusiastic about someone "following her around" at first, she found that Dave's questions led to insights she might not have gained from a direct report. For Brenda, the experience with Dave served as a restart on staff development. It increased her capability and her staff's trust in their own intuition.

Dave also found a leadership podcast about team engagement, being approachable, and creating an open-door culture. He committed to keeping a journal to record his thoughts from his shadowing experiences and listening to the podcasts. He divided his journal pages into three columns of information, recording what he learned, what he was going to try, and insights from applying ideas.

Dave and I kept in touch often as he worked on his plan. He occasionally reminded me how easy it would be to push these activities down on his priority list. He simply had too many meetings to attend, and he had to get the new product launched. But despite these obstacles, he remained committed to the plan.

After two months, Dave started noticing some minor changes. He made greeting his team a morning ritual. He made it a priority to always acknowledge them when he passed them in the hallway. He would stop by their desks to check in, and they soon began stopping by his office, too. Some of the conversations they had were casual, but many had a

business focus. In fact, during one of those conversations a direct report helped Dave work through a big challenge with the new product he was working on.

Seven months after Dave's initial feedback, he launched his new product, and it exceeded many of the projections. This was in part due to his having redefined the marketing strategy based on input from Brenda. In addition to the strategic planning knowledge she had shared with him over the months, she also provided important insights that contributed to the success of the new product launch.

Transformation happens when you move from ideas to action in a deliberate way. The result can be marked in time as a version of you before and after. Dave was deliberate in his approach to his development when he accepted the feedback, decided on what kind of leader he wanted to be, developed a plan, and took action. There was an opportunity at every step along the way for him to give up or put off his commitment. But he persisted and the results paid off.

Motivation has to come from within. So why do *you* want to achieve your peak leadership fitness? Is it because you want to climb the corporate ladder? Do you want to make a difference in the lives of those you lead? Do you want to be a leader known for developing future leaders and delivering results?

If you want optimal results, one thing is certain—you must shift from leadership development activities that merely check a box to those that are transformational. Don't be a leadership couch potato—doing nothing or passively participating in activities that come your way. Now is the time to take control and become the leader you've always wanted—and the one your team and organization need.

## Tracking Your Performance

Let's summarize some basics:

- If you sense you aren't the leader you thought you were or the leader you want to be, I'm here to tell you that your

intuition may be correct. You've been picking up the signals from somewhere. Your leadership glands are telling you to improve your leadership fitness.

- Start a leadership fitness log. Write down all the clues, comments, or glances—or moments of deadly silence—you've noticed coming from your team and colleagues. Be honest with yourself. Then write down what you said or didn't say and what you did or didn't do that prompted those behaviors.
- Leadership development requires self-awareness and focused effort. You'll learn more about both in later chapters.
- Remember, leadership is not about you; it is primarily about them.

# APPENDIX

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## RESOURCES FOR REACHING PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS

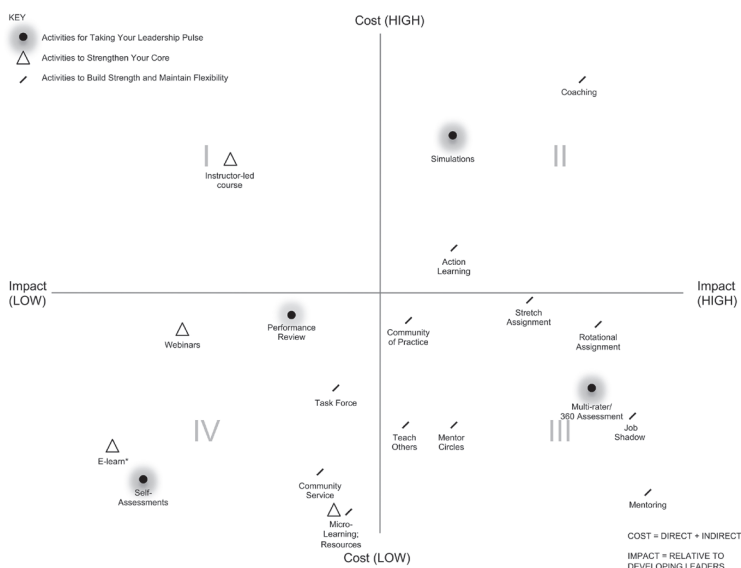
As you take that first step and continue along your path to peak leadership fitness, consider the following resources as a quick reference toolkit to help think through, plan for, and try out leadership development activities. You should adapt these resources based on your personal experiences and the unique context from which you will apply them.

- ❑ Leadership Fitness Cost-Impact Matrix
- ❑ Peak Leadership Fitness Plan Template
- ❑ Sample Peak Leadership Fitness Plan
- ❑ A Practical Collection of Core Leadership Skills
- ❑ Mentoring Roles, Guidelines, and Resources
- ❑ Preparing for a Successful Job Shadow Experience
- ❑ Sample Job Shadow Discussion Guide and Focus Areas
- ❑ Summary of Peak Leadership Fitness Tips

# LEADERSHIP FITNESS

## COST-IMPACT MATRIX

Limited resources (time and money) and not knowing where to start are the two biggest challenges most leaders face when it comes to their development. Use the Leadership Fitness Cost-Impact Matrix to help make decisions and prioritize development activities that meet your specific needs. This sample matrix plots different activities for taking your leadership pulse, strengthening your core, and building strength and maintaining flexibility.



# PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS

## PLAN TEMPLATE

Use this template to create your own leadership fitness plan. Make sure you document, detail, prioritize, and track what you are going to do as part of your plan. Revisit it and modify it as needed.

As a reminder, keep it to a single page so you can easily view and track your plan. I also recommend printing your plan and posting it in a location you see every day.

Fitness Principles		
» I will	» I will	» I will
» I will	» I will	» I will
» I will	» I will	» I will
Leadership Fitness Goals <i>(What I will focus on)</i>	Leadership Fitness Activities <i>(Specific actions I will take)</i>	Leadership Fitness Markers <i>(How I will measure success)</i>
1.	» » »	» » »
2.	» » »	» » »
3.	» » »	» » »
<b>Recovery Plan</b> <i>(How I'll seek recovery)</i>		

# SAMPLE PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS PLAN

Fitness Principles		
» I will take the first step. » I will put in the effort. » I will help others.		» I will overcome obstacles. » I will monitor consumption. » I will seek recovery
Leadership Fitness Goals <i>(What I will focus on)</i>	Leadership Fitness Activities <i>(Specific actions I will take)</i>	Leadership Fitness Markers <i>(How I will measure success)</i>
1. Increase industry, competitor, and customer knowledge. Expand what I know about our industry and competitors, and develop strong connections with customers to understand what they value.	» Sign up for and read daily industry news feeds (1/1) » Have a meet and greet with three members of the sales and product departments (3/15) » Do a ride along on a sales call (5/19) » Attend industry conferences and summarize key points for team (5/2-7 and 11/6-9)	» Review daily feeds daily » Complete ride-along and clearly defined customer insights and implications » Complete at least six cross-organization meet and greets, and gain a better understanding of what they do, and ideas for collaboration
2. Elevate platform and public speaking skills. Establish comfort, confidence, and capability for speaking in front of groups.	» Join Toastmasters (2/1) » Partner with Jane to learn how she prepares for speeches (2/19) » Give three speeches by June in front of progressively bigger groups; ask Jane to observe and give feedback on each (6/1)	» Establish a consistent speech prep plan » Deliver three or more speeches—share what I learned about customers or financials in at least one » Incorporate feedback from each previous speech into the next one
3. Establish financial acumen. Learn how to read, understand, interpret, and use financial data and reports to improve my team and department performance.	» Review team monthly financial reports and provide summary to department head; identify and discuss trends and possible cause-effect relationships (1/3-ongoing) » Take company's Finance for Non-Financial Managers course (1/11) » Join a project team or task force looking at financial issues across the organization (3/25)	» Complete the finance course » Access and review key financial reports monthly » Summarize critical report data for my boss without help » Meet the team budget » Participate on a project team with lead financial responsibilities; give specific recommendations to leadership for improving financial performance
Recovery Plan <i>(How I'll seek recovery)</i>		
1. I will turn off all electronics by 9 p.m. 2. I will start a journal to write down what I am grateful for and other thoughts and ideas every day. 3. I will get at least seven hours of sleep each night and never go more than two days in a row without it.		

## A PRACTICAL COLLECTION OF CORE LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Effective leaders must develop their technical knowledge, interpersonal skills, personal skills, and complex process skills. Together, these skills make up your core.

Technical Skills	Interpersonal Skills	Personal Skills	Complex Process Skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Functional expertise</li> <li>» Knowledge of the business and industry</li> <li>» Competitor knowledge</li> <li>» Financial acumen (budgets and P&amp;L)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Collaboration</li> <li>» Work across boundaries</li> <li>» Political savvy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Time management</li> <li>» Project management</li> <li>» Communication</li> <li>» Executive presence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Strategic thinking</li> <li>» Problem solving</li> <li>» Decision making</li> <li>» Innovation</li> <li>» Change management</li> </ul>



## MENTORING ROLES, GUIDELINES, AND RESOURCES

Mentoring is a knowledge-sharing relationship between two people—mentor and mentee—and it can take place at any stage of your leadership journey. The key to ensuring a successful mentoring relationship is having a plan and purpose and committing to it, while staying flexible. Use the information in this section to help understand each role, as well as how to set a mentoring agreement and what topics to talk about.

### **Mentor**

- Learn and understand the goals and career aspirations of the mentee.
- Act as a teacher and role model.
- Provide guidance for on-the-job challenges.
- Become a safe person with whom to discuss professional concerns.
- Do not serve as or replace the mentee.
- Provide insight into organizational culture and work ethic.
- Guide mentee when taking charge of their career.
- Support the professional development of the mentee and actively coach to achieve goals.
- Provide an independent view of technical and nontechnical performance.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Make a commitment to be available and accessible to the mentee.
- Provide honest feedback.
- Agree to re-evaluate the mentor relationship as the development needs of the mentee evolve.

### **Mentee**

- Take primary responsibility for coordinating the mentoring process (such as setting meetings and creating the agenda).
- Maintain primary responsibility for their professional development.
- Assess strengths and development needs, and prepare to discuss performance and career-related issues.
- Be open to constructive feedback.
- See value in using the mentor as a resource when creating and implementing a development plan.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Commit to learning and developing skills addressed during mentoring sessions.

## The Mentoring Agreement

The mentoring agreement is a foundation for the relationship. The following are some suggested topics to discuss and agree upon during the first meeting.

- **Confidentiality.** Agree to respect sensitive and personal information shared during sessions.
- **Time.** Set the frequency of meetings and accessibility of the mentor. Also, agree on the length and location of the meetings.
- **Expectations.** Review and agree upon roles and responsibilities.
- **Goals.** Establish mentee goals (ideally tied to performance feedback).
- **Progress report.** Decide how progress will be measured.
- **Agenda.** Determine what preparation should be accomplished by both the mentor and mentee before each session.

## Potential Meeting Topics

Beyond the necessary agreements listed, you can review several discussion topics to give direction to the mentor relationship. Here are some sample topics that can be addressed during the first meeting, as well as over the course of the relationship:

- professional and educational backgrounds
- performance feedback and areas for performance improvement
- current projects and daily challenges
- current career and development goals and challenges
- thoughts on what it takes to succeed
- effective communication with stakeholders, peers, and colleagues
- potential development opportunities
- career path opportunities and concerns.

# PREPARING FOR A SUCCESSFUL JOB SHADOW EXPERIENCE

Job shadowing can be a powerful development tool. To get the most from a shadow experience, you must have a plan. Your role as a shadow host is, ultimately, to deepen the employee's understanding of your area of expertise and demonstrate the necessary tools and educational background that make you successful in your job. Use these steps to create a successful shadowing experience.

## **Prepare in Advance**

- Understand who the shadowees are (background, role, and experience).
- What are you going to teach them (specific activities or experience)?
- If appropriate, assign pre-read materials (a project overview or meeting agenda).
- Notify shadowees of specific requirements for shadowing (meeting location, attire for meeting or client visit, and travel info).
- Determine the learning objectives for the employee's shadow.

## **Introduce**

- Share your background, role, and experience.
- Be prepared to answer shadowee questions (listed on the next page).
- Get to know shadowees, including their background, role, and experience.
- Introduce shadowees to people with whom you interact.
- Provide an overview of the shadow agenda and learning objectives.

## **Educate**

- Provide background info on the client, project, meeting, or work for the day.
- Share how to interact:
  - » with each other when there are questions
  - » with clients, customers, and stakeholders.
- Explain the work:
  - » What are you doing when you work on a meeting, project, and so forth?
  - » What will you do related to the work after today?
- How does this fit the big picture?

## **Summarize**

- Ask shadowees what they learned from the experience. What stood out?
- Ask if they have any ideas, suggestions, or insights related to the project or activities.
- Leave time to allow them to ask questions.

# SAMPLE JOB SHADOW DISCUSSION GUIDE

## AND FOCUS AREAS

The following questions are to help the shadowees focus on what they want from their job shadow experience. The list is illustrative and the focus should be based upon the objectives of the job shadow. Note: Not all questions are applicable under all circumstances.

### **Personal Experiences**

- Why did you select this profession?
- What experiences helped you prepare for this job or role?
- What do you like most about this job? Why?
- What does it mean to be successful here?
- What are your professional goals?

### **General Work**

- What are your general responsibilities, duties, or tasks?
- What kinds of problems do you solve?
- What skills or knowledge do you need to solve these problems?
- What tools, resources, or technology do you typically use?
- What kinds of decisions do you make?
- How do you manage your time on one project? Multiple projects?
- Who are your stakeholders?

### **Project Specific**

- What is the goal of the project?
- What are your responsibilities on the project?
- What are the challenges of the project?
- What are the deliverables?
- Who is the client?
- How do you interact and communicate with the client?
- How did you prepare for this engagement?

### **Company Culture**

- How are decisions made? How are those decisions communicated to employees?
- What skills and characteristics does the firm value? What gets rewarded or punished?
- How are expectations communicated?
- How do people from different departments interact?
- Are there opportunities for further training and education?
- What does it take to succeed here?

## SUMMARY OF PEAK LEADERSHIP FITNESS TIPS

Each chapter in part 2 concluded with fitness tips to help you get the most out of your development activities. Here's a complete list for easy reference.

### **Fitness Tips to Get Started**

- ❑ Mix it up! Incorporate a variety of learning media into your development.
- ❑ Make leadership development fun.
- ❑ Always incorporate opportunities to practice what you learn, get feedback, and reflect.

### **Fitness Tips for Taking Your Pulse**

- ❑ You can't manage what you don't measure. Complete a reliable 360-degree assessment and build your development plan using the results.
- ❑ Take initiative with feedback: seek it, accept it, and act on it.
- ❑ Ask someone from your team to give you feedback following a meeting or presentation.
- ❑ Give yourself a grade on the most important leadership activity of the day.
- ❑ Print your fitness plan and place it in a location you will see each day.
- ❑ Keep your leadership fitness plan handy; never go more than two weeks without reviewing your plan.
- ❑ Take your leadership pulse often. Do it formally every 12-18 months, and informally at least weekly.

### **Fitness Tips to Strengthen Your Core**

- ❑ If someone tells you to work on your leadership skills, ask for specificity.
- ❑ Although all leaders need to continue to strengthen their core, those earlier in their career should spend more time in this area.
- ❑ Effort trumps ability, but you should make every effort to combine effort and ability.
- ❑ Never take a leadership course on something that you will not have the opportunity to put into practice in the very near term.
- ❑ Find activities that help you build or reinforce your core on a daily or weekly basis to stay current in key areas.
- ❑ Immediately following every formal leadership development activity you participate in, write down two to three of the best ideas you learned and how you will incorporate them into your routine.

### **Fitness Tips to Maintain Flexibility**

- ☐ When starting out with informal learning, keep it simple. Try learning about a different part of the business from a colleague or read about your industry.
- ☐ Incorporate at least one development activity from each informal leadership development category.
- ☐ Find a leadership fitness buddy to challenge and support you throughout your journey.
- ☐ Schedule a meet and greet with someone in your organization whom you don't know. (Extra tips: Come prepared with questions to understand their department and function. Be respectful of their time.)
- ☐ Find at least one person you can go to for leadership advice.
- ☐ Become a mentor to someone in your professional network.
- ☐ Volunteer to teach a class or give a presentation at a professional association.
- ☐ Participate in a ride-along or shadow someone from your team or other part of your organization.
- ☐ Read at least three business books a year and one article a month.
- ☐ Commit to trying one new approach to informal learning and share your lessons learned with a peer, colleague, or friend.

### **Fitness Tips to Build Your Leadership Endurance**

- ☐ Once you achieve a leadership fitness goal, set a new one.
- ☐ Prior to undertaking a leadership activity, ask a trusted colleague to provide feedback at the end. Be specific on what they should look for.
- ☐ Seek recovery by pausing and reflecting on your leadership and what you are learning.
- ☐ Have a clear and compelling reason for why you want to be the best leader you can be.
- ☐ Set a rule in your house for a device-free zone and device-free hours.
- ☐ Take your first step toward peak leadership fitness today.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

Remember my first principle? You never know what you are capable of until you take that first step. Having a strong support network to encourage you to take that first step and be there throughout the journey instills confidence and makes the journey and the outcome that much better. I've had the good fortune to know and learn from some great people, and I'd like to acknowledge those who have been and continue to be there for me throughout this endeavor.

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