

PHILLIP C. REINKE



My
Mentor

Direction for Successful Twenty-First Century Leadership

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*Direction for Successful
Twenty-First Century
Leadership*

Phillip C. Reinke



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*To those who understand that there has never
existed a great leader who traveled alone.*

To my mentor, who remains nameless by a promise.

*To Lori, who made me whole through her
subtle mentoring.*

Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	ix
Trust: The Mentoring Begins	1
Competition	5
Leadership and Honesty: Who is the Hardest Person to Be Honest With?	9
Leadership and Personal Integrity: The Road Less Traveled	19
Leadership and Perception: Hindsight and Regrets	25
Leadership and Risk: It's All How You Handle It	31
Leadership and Personal Missions: A Man On a Mission	37
Leadership and Dreaming: Can You Handle Living Your Dream?	45
Leadership and Persistence: Persistence Pays Off	51
Leadership and Making Things Possible: Possibility Thinking	55
Leadership and Listening: Who's More Important...the Speaker or the Listener?	59
Leadership and Self-Sacrifice: A Birthday to Remember	63
Leadership and Performance: Meaningful Performance Evaluations	69
Leadership and Loyalty: On Management	73
Leadership and Experience: Déjà Vu	77
Leadership and Communication: The When and How of What You Say	79
Leadership and Focusing on the Right Things: Talent and Genius	83
Leadership and Proper Planning: The Recipe for Success	87
Leadership, Passion, and Capability: Passion and Talent Are Not the Same	91
Leadership and Conclusions	99
Leadership and Sustained Performance	103
Leadership and Change	107
Leadership and Personal Honesty	111
Leadership and Being Yourself	115

Leadership and Integrity	121
Career Searching: Aligning Talent With Goals	127
Leadership and Engagement	133
The Curse of a Visionary	137
Leadership and Tolerance: When Do You Accommodate?	141
Leadership and the Importance of Sharing: What Next?	147
Leadership and Setting a Course: When to Lead and When to Follow.	151
Leadership, Focus, and Persistence: The Real Meaning of Setting Your Pace	155
Leadership and Proving Yourself: Making Your Mark	161
Leadership and Taking a Stand: A New Year’s Challenge.	169
Leadership and Goodbye: Don’t Wait to Say What You Need to Say . . .	175
Leadership and Management Are Not the Same: The Best People	181
Leadership and Façade: What Lasting Beauty Depends On.	191
Leadership and Paradigm-Breaking: The “Secret” to the Building of the Pyramids.	197
Leadership and Class: The Gentlemen’s Sport	203
Leadership and Self-Perception: The Right Kind of Ego Problem?	207
Leadership and Modeling Preferred Behaviors: Micromanaging Success	213
Leadership and Personal Ability: Starting...Anything or Nothing at All?	217
Leadership and True Passion: Passion, Persistence, and Direction	221
Leadership and Role Change: Something Big	227
Leadership and Decision-Making: Decisions, Decisions, Decisions	235
Leadership and Barrier-Breaking: Beware!	239
Leadership and Decision-Making: On Career Change	243
Leadership and Branding: My Signature	249
Leadership and Vision: The Critical and Often Missing Element in High Performance.	253
Epilogue: Leadership, Mentoring, and Seafaring	257

Preface

Many, if not all, literary works are created with the intent of keeping the reader entertained and engaged through the entirety of the book. This is accomplished through the use of various literary tools, such as plots and sub-plots. In the case of plots, the author often keeps the reader in suspense, only revealing the true purpose in the prologue. Applying that strategy to this book would be an injustice to the reader. Before we go deeper into this thought, allow me to establish some foundation.

If I had three wishes, one of those wishes would be for the development of a training program for mentors and those who are being mentored. Mentoring plays an important role in the transfer of knowledge and experience. Although it appears as a relatively new concept, it has its meager beginnings embedded in the relationships that were fostered around the campfires of our primitive ancestors. The transfer of knowledge and experience occurred during the communication of myths, legends, and personal tales. The astute “underling” intently listened to the stories and learned from them, without the pain and injury that often accompanied the actual experience.

Let’s fast-forward to the twenty-first century. Mentoring continues to be an important element in an individual’s personal and professional development. Every year, numerous mentor relationships spring up. Some of these relationships are formal; others are informal. “Career coaching” has become a viable business venture for many people. The sad thing is that a lot of folks enter with excitement and high expectations, only to have them dashed in short order.

At minimum, this gives mentoring and career coaching a bad name. I have often heard disappointed people ask, “Why should I waste my time with a mentor who doesn’t have a clue on what should be done?” The long-term impact of experiences like these may be the “death blow” to a critical aspect of real human development. Being a mentor requires a skill set that does not come naturally. This may be an explanation as to why our primitive ancestors limited this role to the tribes’ elders and shaman. The mentor role has a specialized set of selfless demands, which are often learned through experience. Being mentored is no less demanding. This role and its behaviors must be learned in order to extract the full benefits of the relationship.

The prior, having been said, sets the stage for unveiling the strategy to be found within this book. Hopefully, the reader will find it entertaining and concurrently enlightening. This story is more than a series of campfire myths and legends; it is a training guide for mentors and for those who are mentored. The astute reader will quickly see that this is a subtle training manual with three separate and distinct important messages. They are:

- Lessons for mentors. The “how” a mentor should act (critical behaviors). It is important to “watch” and learn from my mentor’s actions. There are lessons to be learned from both a “this is what I need to do” and “this is what I do not ever want to do” perspective.
- Lessons for those who are mentored. Just like the previous lessons learned by observing the mentor, the mentored can learn the “how to or not to act” and “what to do and not to do.”
- The actual messages, or lessons, conveyed by my mentor. Each entry has a specific lesson conveyed from my mentor to me or from me to my mentor. The lessons themselves are as (if not more) important than the lessons learned through observation of behavior.

This having been said, I hope that you are able to directly relate to every experience as if you were sitting with us.

Introduction

THE JOURNEY BACK

The relationship between a mentor and a mentee is a special one. In fact, it rivals and sometimes surpasses that of marriage! “For better or worse” has a completely different meaning when you are with a true mentor. My mentor once told me, “You may be a solitary player in this world, but you can never succeed if you try to go it alone.” I learned that lesson early in my relationship with him and over many career changes. I have always engaged a second set of eyes in almost everything that I do, and have always strongly suggested the same to others. Some have heeded my advice, while others chose to take the lonely path!

But I digress. Basically, if you call someone your mentor, you have made a commitment that is sacred. It is precious. Do not ever take it lightly or betray it. If you do, it will be the single biggest mistake you’ll ever make in your life!

My world was recently up-ended and I felt the need to reconnect with my mentor. I needed his set of eyes...his advice...his admonition and comfort. As I thought about it, I realized what the real purpose for having a mentor is: to take the loneliness out of the journey. I began thinking back to when we first met; he was already ancient! He was forty years my elder and I was twenty-five. He bore scars of battle—literally, from World War II—on his surface, but the ones that truly mattered could not be seen.

Those scars—why they happened, what he learned from them, and how to avoid them—were shared with a select few. I was one of the

fortunate ones, and I will always cherish that. “You win some or you learn something,” he’d say to me. I found myself missing those conversations, hungering for them. The reality is that he has long since left this world, and I was too busy to attend his funeral. At the time, I thought I had more pressing commitments. I wish I...I thought. But then it dawned on me: I had learned something in the process of creating a regret. Suddenly, I felt a smile creep across my face.

I wallowed in the fact that I hadn’t made more time to be with him when he was here. Then I recalled one of his recurring admonitions: “Some lessons learned cannot be used to fix mistakes, but only to keep us from repeating the stupidity in the future.” My life path had pulled me from him and he understood. Honestly, sometimes I felt as if he made that happen. However, he wrote and telephoned almost as frequently as when we spent time face-to-face; that’s just who he was.

I was definitely never alone. My mentor made sure of that. Unfortunately, I did not return the favor as much as I should have. Regrets, I thought. I hate them! Mostly I was upset because I knew that I would never form the type of bond we had with anyone else. There was no one like him. To this day, I never sought out a replacement or allowed someone else to seek me out. I couldn’t. Once you’ve had the best, anything else is just not the same. I remembered one of the last things he wrote to me: I have shared everything you need to be more successful than 99 percent of the rest of the world. Share it with others, but chose them wisely. He closed his letter with something about needing to go “be with the Mrs.” He had his priorities straight.

At that moment, I felt the urge to call him. It was strange because I consciously knew that there would be no answer on the other line. I felt the need to write to him, but I knew that the mailbox would never contain anything more than envelopes with Undeliverable or Return to sender stamped on them. That was a depressing thought.

Then I recalled a somewhat strange discussion that he and I had a long time ago. It had been about reality. He told me that memories are as real as the present. The only thing that differentiates them is when they are occurring. It was an amusing discussion that I can still recall with vivid accuracy. “That is eerie!” I noted at the time. He chuckled.

So I decided to try and visualize my mentor and recall our shared memories, bringing him back to the present—my present—at a time

when I needed him most. Sure enough, I slowly began to see his face. I began to smell the filter-less cigarettes that he smoked. I could soon taste his favorite rum that he always shared with “his favorites.” It was all so much easier than I thought it would be! Perhaps, I can reconnect, I thought.

And so began my odyssey. I leaned back in my chair, the same way he had done when we first met. Across from me was an empty chair. I took a deep breath, relaxed my mind, and looked up. “What brings you here today?” he asked, smiling that smug smile of his. “I have been waiting and watching, you know. It took you a long time, but I knew that you would finally get here...”

Trust: The Mentoring Begins

“I have heard it said that trust is a two-way street. This is wrong. It is a one-way journey, where you earn the right to have others ride with you...”

—MY MENTOR

My mentor and I had known each other for years. This day was no different than most of our times together. We sat, each of us in our personal spots, comfortably reclined. Between us were five critical items: a small table, a bottle of my mentor’s favorite “can’t get it here” rum, two glasses, and a bucket full of ice. These critical items were what he referred to as “the essential ingredients” of a good mentoring session. I knew that he was only half-serious. The rum was a rarity (not very expensive, but almost unavailable), and we generally only had it on *very* special occasions, like his or my birthday. He refused to drink anything else, and that intrigued me, but I never asked him about his little quirk.

He leaned forward and grabbed a handful of half-melted ice. Then he dropped a few cubes in his glass and a few in mine. Next, he lifted the bottle of rum and poured precisely equal amounts into each of our glasses...emptying the entire bottle!

Before I knew it, I had lost track of time. All I knew was that it was getting late. But it had been such a joy to sit with him, and it was even more enjoyable to watch him laugh. Suddenly, he snickered and looked at me with a funny expression. “Wasn’t that bottle full when we started?”

“I think so...” I grinned sheepishly. With that, we both burst out laughing.

“The world does not laugh enough!” he observed. “Perhaps we should start our own business and make drinking mandatory at every break!” He was so amused at the thought that he nearly fell out of his chair from laughing so hard. “I mean, if a union can demand breaks, why can’t we force them to drink?”

He could see from my face that I was not as amused as he was, but it was still a funny notion. “*You* are not the one who works with the union,” I reprimanded him. “I really do not see the humor in it!”

Eventually, the laughter began to taper off into the aftershocks of a few chuckles until we sighed and caught our breath. That’s when our discussion took a totally different direction. I resituated myself in my seat. “Why are you mentoring me?” I inquired. “Why did you choose *me* over all of the other people who you could be mentoring? Was the company paying you extra?”

“Those are stupid questions!” he shot back. “*You* picked *me!*”

I smiled, shaking my head. I knew that was the furthest thing from the truth. He had definitely approached me; I remember that day vividly. After he had come up to me, I quickly went over to a friend and told him that a random old guy had just walked up to me out of the blue and asked if he could start mentoring me. Slightly confused, my confidant asked who the man was. When I told him who, his eyes bulged. “*Oh, my god!*” he cried. “He only mentors one or two people at any time, and those openings only come via death! Say yes!”

So I did. And there we were, suddenly on the brink of arguing over who had picked whom. I mentally wrote off his inaccuracy as rum-induced, but then I became intrigued. *How did he come to this conclusion?* I wondered. *He is one of the most accurate people I know!* I sat quiet, not saying anything. I knew him well enough to know that doing so would draw a response.

“Don’t you remember the first time we met?” he reflected. “You and I were standing in the food processing area with two government people, and I lit up a cigarette while we talked. You immediately grabbed it, stomped it out, and kicked it into a gutter!”

I laughed. “Yes, I do remember that! You have the biggest set of—” I caught myself and rephrased my words. “I mean, you are always challenging authority...just because you can get away with it!”

He sighed, still smiling. “I know what you mean...and that *is* my weakness, yes. It somehow always gets me into trouble!” he said with an almost confession-like tone. Then he looked at me. “Why did you take that cigarette from me, anyway?” he queried.

“Because I did not want you to get into trouble!” I blurted.

“That was as gutsy a move as my lighting up!” he said. A new grin appeared across his face, and I could tell he was replaying that moment in time. “You see, my friend—and this is not the rum talking—a relationship such as ours is special,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I agree,” I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“But any relationship can be just as special. In fact, if a relationship is missing this element, you have to question whether it is a relationship at all. It is best explained by my concept of a relationship thermometer. Back when the missus was still alive, I could tell how well our relationship was functioning with this simple concept—its health. Its health is equivalent to a relationship thermometer. Get it?” he paused, making sure I was following him.

I think he could see that my ability to comprehend his analogies was impeded by the fact that we drank the same amount—and I weighed half as much as him. “I think so,” I replied.

My mentor nodded. “I’ll go a bit deeper now. I knew that she could look out for me better than I could ever look out for myself, and the same was true in reverse. Are you following me?” he asked.

I nodded, wondering how drunk I actually looked.

He continued. “When I felt that I had to look out for myself, or saw that she had to look out for herself, I knew that our relationship needed some shoring up! That is how I took the temperature of our relationship, so to speak. And that was a very special relationship,” he reflected. “In fact, I have only had one or two other ones like that before.”

I nodded, understanding the relationship thermometer concept. “Okay, so what does your relationship with the missus have to do with your mentoring of me?” I asked curiously.

“Well, let’s go back to the details of the first day!” he suggested. “I reached into my pocket, took out a cigarette, and lit it. But before I could even take the first puff, you walked over to me and grabbed it from my fingers. Then you looked me straight in the eye. It was not a look of anger or disgust; it was different. I tugged ever so slightly on *my* smoke, and you stood your ground,” my mentor recalled. “And even when the flames of the lighter burned your hand, you didn’t let go. I bet you didn’t know I knew that!”

I laughed. “No, I didn’t.”

He continued. “Yes, and then without missing a beat, you took it from me and said, ‘Let’s take a break. We’ve stood around here long enough.’ It wasn’t what you did; it was why you did it. I could see

your intent. It was automatic. It was deep...a part of you...not a façade. At that moment, I saw that you were looking out for me better than I could ever do for myself. I wanted to foster that. Basically, that was you asking me to be your mentor!”

The room quieted and became a bit more somber than I was used to during our little sessions. *Wow*, I thought. *I guess I never really thought of it that way before.*

My mentor smiled as if he had just read my thoughts. “Anyway, let me call a cab for you and pay for your ride home. I’ll bring your car to work in the morning, and you can drive me home in the evening. That will give us some time to talk about some important things. Besides, maybe it is time that I begin returning the favor. I owe you that.”

I nodded, seeing in his eyes that he was done talking for the night. The conversation made him long for times past. He was going to close his eyes and spend some “dream time” time with the missus again. I couldn’t fault him for that. He missed her deeply ever since she passed on.

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