

# An Unconventional *of the Origins*

By Peter Gammell



There are as many ways to define leadership as there are leaders. In my opinion, a great leader is someone whose genuine passion for a vision is more important than leading it. These individuals may lend their substantial talents to leading an initiative, but their commitment to achieving the vision allows them to effectively manage egocentric ambitions.

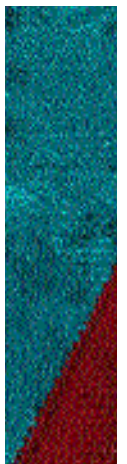
There is no benchmark to compare leadership characteristics in light of such a definition because the conditions in which they are manifested are completely circumstantial. It is based on an individual's emotional commitment and a maturity that only comes from those profound experiences that allow one to truly know themselves and their priorities.

Years ago, while acting in a professional capacity, I was responsible for an accidental explosion that resulted in minor injuries to others, wide-spread disruption and me being hospitalized for two months. This experience had a profound effect on me, especially in light of a particularly over-inflated sense of self that I carried around prior to the incident. The humiliation was utterly thorough and the conditions of my life were filtered down to one simple decision: will this experience crush me or will it be an opportunity for unprecedented growth.

I chose to survive and adapt, which required that I embrace change and then spend the next year combatting the built-in resistance that accompanied the decision. As I reflected on the effects of the incident on my life I began to recognize the nature of true behaviour change and began to feel grateful for the experience. This appreciation led me to secretly develop an enthusiasm for the next life-altering experience I was bound to face. Suddenly, nameless dreads became surmountable.

Shedding a layer of fear, prompted me to start and successfully build my first business, and then to go on and create another. Amusingly, this new direction has led me to near financial ruin – presumably the 'next' life-altering experience.

This new experience is not as enlightening as I had romanticized, but it has led me to the question, 'where does true leadership originate?' Is leadership merely self-confidence manifested in response to the discovery of a campaign that has personal meaning? Since 'personal meaning' is strictly based on one's own experiences, I submit that the true measure of a person's capacity for extraordinary leadership is a result of their experiences and moments of personal crisis. The study of leadership seems to be divided between competencies that are either



# View *of Leadership*

learned or intuitive, and character strengths – which are largely based on life experiences. Leadership competencies – those repeatable actions or approaches that come naturally – may attract a following and achieve results, but those competencies are incapable of sustaining meaning. True leadership is demonstrated in those who are capable of maintaining a following based on their character and their commitment to a vision. A cohort of followers who face great hardship as a result of their devotion to a leader's unwavering commitment, in turn, strengthens the character of its constituents.

The leadership development movement has produced a plethora of philosophical camps and methodologies all of which have validity as a means of effecting personal and professional change. But this movement is really only focussed on the identification and development of leadership competencies that can be labelled and presumably measured in the absence of a cause that has personal meaning.

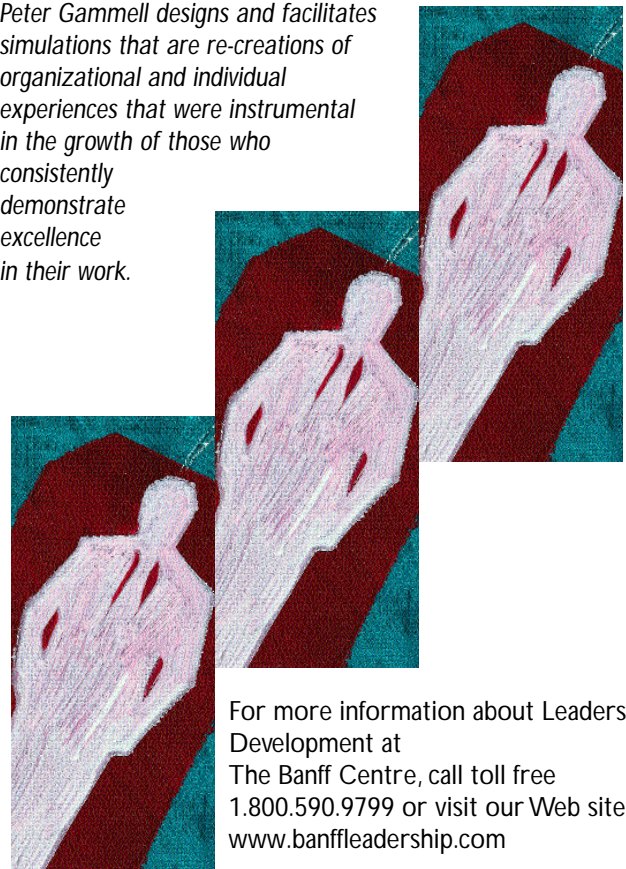
Although there is little objection to the idea that true leadership is born in periods of life-altering challenge and experiences, little attention is given to its study except in the form of biographies of famous achievers. This is primarily because it is assumed that such qualities are derived from personal experiences that are too rare or individualized to be considered conventional wisdom for broad application.

Fortunately, those extraordinary individuals who find themselves compelled to take risks and embrace failure face the most daunting of experiences: that of having to seek out a meaningful cause or vision that warrants their commitment. I say "fortunately" because it is the willingness to question oneself and deal with an uncertain future in the name of a worthy commitment that generates the qualities of extraordinary leadership. The breadth and depth of that leadership only becomes known over time through a series of challenges and controversies. These people are destined to walk the

tightrope of risk, quietly building an array of experiences that steel them for the next event. True leaders seek growth that is perpetually fluid, intermingling high points and low points that become indistinguishable in terms of the value they represent.

Martin Luther King's famous words hold great significance to me, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." These meaningful words convey that extraordinary leadership is not an exclusive club, nor is it a constant with any individual.

*Peter Gammell designs and facilitates simulations that are re-creations of organizational and individual experiences that were instrumental in the growth of those who consistently demonstrate excellence in their work.*



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