

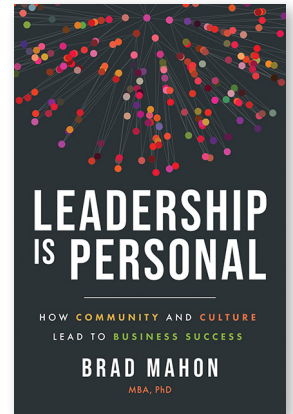


Executive Book Summaries[®]

Leadership Is Personal

How Community and Culture Lead to Business Success

by **Brad Mahon**



Contents

Introduction:
Why Community
Engagement Matters
Page 2

Part 1: Discovering
the Leader Within You
Page 2

Part 2: Fostering
Community Connections
Page 4

Part 3: Cultivating
Internal Culture
Page 5

Conclusion:
The Engagement
Advantage
Page 7

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

What makes a great leader? Achieving success in every business venture? Keeping shareholders happy? Climbing the corporate ladder as fast as you can?

Leadership Is Personal: How Community and Culture Lead to Business Success by Brad Mahon proposes another perspective. Leadership is about aligning your personal values with those of the company you work for. It means leading by example and being able to create a vision and inspire your team to make it happen. It is about creating true community engagement and bringing all the pieces together to create mutually beneficial relationships.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- The importance of defining your values and using them to guide you in your leadership journey
- Find your voice by assessing your teams' feedback – both spoken and unspoken
- The importance of building strong relationships with the community your business serves
- Create and embrace the corporate culture in everything you do

Introduction: Why Community Engagement Matters

At the age of thirteen, I set about negotiating my first business deal: full compliance with grounding punishment in exchange for an electric guitar and amplifier.

I did make noise in some local bars, found my way into music school and settled into a teaching job at the local college.

Leadership was never part of the plan; it was an accident. Or was it?

Back when I was ten years old, I had been named one of several team captains for next year's school intramurals.

I worked up the courage to ask our principal, Mr. Walters, what a house leader did. "I want you to be you. I want you to help others, especially the younger kids," he said. "Encourage them, teach them, and show them, through your actions."

It was an early lesson that shaped my views on leadership, culture, and community. Teenage Brad ran for class president and won. At the time, I never saw these as leadership roles. Only later would I connect the dots: leadership is service.

This book is a reflection on my life's successes and failures. What I've achieved is teachable. My core premise? Community engagement and corporate culture drive business success.

Part 1: Discovering the Leader Within You

Chapter 1: Knowing Your Values

I was at the go-kart track with my wife and our four kids. I felt the flip phone's vibration in my pants pocket and opened it to answer.

"Enrollments in the college's guitar program are climbing," Laura, an administrator in our music department, explained. "Senior administration believes the program holds enough potential to create its first coordinator position, and we're thinking of you for the job."

Five days later, I signed a one-year contract. One by one, I'd sign six more.

Across those seven years, the program's reputation grew from local to regional to national to international, with enrollment increasing by 357 percent. It happened thanks to one thing: engagement.

I felt unprepared for leadership; I had no training. I never thought to consult books, take leadership or management courses, or seek other resources.

My guitar professor, Sharon, handed me the book that would change my life: W. Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*.

The book led to my embrace of performance psychology. I returned to my worn copy of *The Inner Game*, determined this time to apply its principles to my new leadership career.

My first leadership role helped affirm my belief in the value of community and led me to identify another key value: personal growth.

Reflection helped me better understand myself as a leader. That knowledge, in turn, led me to the next step: discovering how my values aligned with those of my employer.

I held a leadership role at an institution that had recently completed its strategic planning process. I contributed to the focus groups that guided the process. Yet, I did not see my core beliefs reflected in the school's mission, in its vision, nor, most distressingly, in its values.

Thankfully, I enjoyed a good working relationship with the university's leader. President Tom encouraged me to imagine putting the newly minted strategic plan into a sifter. He was telling me that I didn't need to see myself in all the plan, only some of it.

I gave the document plenty of time and consideration. My values did not align with the organization's values.

The sifting exercise prompted my discovery of another core value: authenticity. And just like that, I knew: it was time to start looking for a new job.

Values-based leadership goes beyond the bottom line to create authentic buy-in. As Mark Carney, former governor of the banks of England and Canada, writes, values-based leaders generate enthusiastic engagement among colleagues and other stakeholders, including the consent of their community to operate. This fosters organizational success by activating community engagement and nurturing corporate culture.

Chapter 2: Finding Your Voice

I had recently accepted the role of director at what I'll call Protest University. I found a disengaged community and a disgruntled staff.

While many stakeholders were unhappy with more recent

My authentic voice is rooted in my values —of collaboration and care for our shared community.

events and decisions, it was becoming clear that some had never been happy and likely never would be.

Dan, a longtime employee, was one of those people. When he requested a meeting, I brought to the session a frustration-fueled determination to bring some immediate order to the ongoing chaos—and to do it by sending a message.

What a disaster.

My voice was aggressive, and I quickly set him up for the knockout.

I sat alone for several minutes, with everything feeling wrong.

I had found a voice—but was it my voice? It couldn't be. It felt terrible. I needed to find my authentic voice—and fast.

As the turmoil I'd inherited at Protest U continued, it became clear that I'd need to bring my ability to listen to my leadership journey.

I set up one-on-one meetings with every employee and genuinely listened, methodically hearing and assimilating all they said.

Soon, I organized a meeting with the full staff. I gratefully and genuinely acknowledged to the entire group the new perspectives I'd gained.

As I spoke, I felt their eyes locked on mine, their heads nodding, their thoughtful attention. I had listened to them, and now—at last—they were listening to me.

This time, I'd found my authentic voice—the voice of the leader I wanted to be.

My authentic voice is rooted in my values—of collaboration and care for our shared community. Invariably, these values, consistently applied, foster collegiality and growth.

Chapter 3: Creating a Vision

Our kids' impending "launch into the real world" meant I could begin considering leadership opportunities in other cities.

Before long, I sat facing a large interview panel. They offered me the gig: head of performing arts at what I'll call Faraway U.

On my first day, I arrived early, bursting with enthusiasm. It wouldn't last. Inside the department, morale was low. Enrollments had slowly declined for several years.

It was like we were all below deck on a ship, maintaining the engines yet directionless; our only order was "stay afloat." We needed to chart our course. We needed a North Star.

I turned to stakeholders for history lessons and learned of a time when the music department and concert hall were community hubs, complete with vibrant classrooms and sold-out concerts.

During Faraway U's recruitment process, my final interview included a campus tour led by my future boss. When we arrived at the concert hall, the doors were locked. The space was temporarily closed.

Soon after I'd started my new role, we resumed modest activity in the building, including re-inhabiting a few of its offices. Cue the opportunity.

A local concert promoter contacted me. He represented a notable musician, Jeffrey Rempel, and asked about using our concert venue.

The big evening finally came.

The next day, the concert was all people talked about. Students were inspired, faculty and staff were engaged. Even senior admin, the money people, and the facilities staff were pleased.

Our North Star was shining. Brightly.

I had a vision. I imagined our school as a beacon for all—a nucleus for the performing arts, where everyone was welcome. And I immediately started communicating that vision.

We brought diversity to our concert hall by befriending the city's folk festival and other professional presenters. We supported amateur performing arts organizations by

opening our space for rehearsals. When the bewildered yet grateful organizations asked what we wanted in exchange, I asked them to share our logo on their website and identify us as a supporter, sponsor, and friend.

I challenged myself to bring the same energy and enthusiasm to each day. I recognized that I always had a choice. Earning a 10 of 10 for my attitude, effort, and actions was possible every day—it was up to me, and it became more than my goal.

But how exactly—and to what ends—have I applied this principle? Here’s a hint: community.

Part 2: Fostering Community Connections

Chapter 4: Be Visible, Make Connections

Being visible in school allowed me to connect and create meaningful relationships with my teachers and peers. It’s a habit I’ve maintained throughout my career and in my experience, visibility is the essential first step toward engagement.

At a town forum, the facilitator asked the assembled community and business leaders, “What is our town’s value proposition to current and prospective residents?” Attendees began calling out answers: “We have a hospital.” “Indoor swimming pool.”

Finally, someone said, “The college. We have a college in our town.”

It took twelve minutes, and somebody had even mentioned the dog park before our campus! The college’s low visibility in the communities it served could be neatly summed up in one of my mom’s favorite truisms: “Out of sight, out of mind.”

So how, the question became, did we get Grasslands front of mind?

I joined a service club. The atmosphere was pleasant and the conversations friendly, and our networking linked me to other events, activities, and organizations—more opportunities to increase our visibility. Before long, I was no longer the new president of Grasslands, but simply “Brad from the college.” And it all started with simply showing up.

One year later, we doubled our program offerings and tripled enrollment in Hazlet. The year after that, we were running short of classroom space.

Valuing community engagement has contributed to my professional success. Show up, engage, and connect—visibility is a vital investment.

Chapter 5: What Does Your Community Value?

The television series *Friends* was a pop culture phenomenon, producing ten seasons that aired from 1994 to 2004. So what was such a famed show about? Fundamentally, it showed the impact of friendship and drew upon the value our society places on loyalty and connection.

That’s what this new role of mine needed: friends. So I began to look for friends.

I started with people and organizations that already had relations with the college, including elected officials, donors, and sponsors. Another tool aiding my quest to learn what mattered to my communities was attendance at municipal government meetings.

The event drew community leaders, business owners, educators, researchers, and municipal and provincial government officials. All placed great value on the cornerstone of sustainability, and a value I strongly share: access to services. Which of course includes postsecondary education.

This offered Grasslands the opportunity to act, to help fill the need. My slogan became “What can we do for you?”

From small, inexpensive gestures, like opening a gymnasium to the public to big investments, like creating a whole new program or establishing student housing, identifying and collaborating to fill the needs of our organization’s constituents has been a defining factor in Grasslands’ success.

Discovering those communities’ values shaped my approach to engagement here.

Whether you are new to a community or to a role, remember: you bring fresh eyes. Therefore, use them! Attend events and observe. Build connections through conversation. Be curious and genuinely interested. Ask questions. Listen. Then, plainly state that you want to know how your organization can best serve the community.

Chapter 6: Identify Your Potential Partners

In chapter 2, I shared reflections about my time as director at Protest U and finding my voice.

I was called to the vice president’s office. The end-of-day meeting time made me curious and a bit uneasy. My assumptions were wrong. It wasn’t a reprimand, but an offer

Whether you are new to a community or to a role, remember: you bring fresh eyes.

to lead the faculty as interim dean.

In my new interim dean role, I experienced the sense of isolation that has led leaders down through time to affirm the old adage “It’s lonely at the top.”

Protest U was again needing to make difficult decisions, many of which I would now implement. The faculty’s isolation was real; some even seemed to be hoping for its demise. As I studied my struggling faculty, I learned that partnerships, on- and off-campus, had once been a touchstone. We needed to reengage the community.

This excited me, because it also aligned with my values.

We had become disconnected from the community we were supposed to be serving. We needed to realign our program off and quickly. But how?

Medicinal cannabis had been legal in Canada for several years, but now the federal government was planning to broaden the law. The emerging sector required a workforce, so I wondered if our faculty could take a leadership role in cannabis education.

However, we needed a partner; our school was unknown in this sector. David led Green Leaf U’s large cannabis education program. At about three years old, it was well developed, and David and his team wanted to expand the reach of their curriculum.

We sent many emails back and forth. Then it happened: he suggested we meet.

What strikes me most when reflecting on that day is how little we discussed the program, contracts, or other “nuts-and-bolts” details. Instead, we shared stories that revealed our values. I heard his voice and saw his vision. We had a partner, and I had a friend. I wasn’t alone.

We moved forward, signed the papers, and launched the joint (heh) program. And it worked. By providing access to education, we created pathways to employment, which only increased our value proposition to the community we served.

Partnerships are essential to progress and foundational to

your professional network and support system. Explore your community to identify potential partners and proactively build partnerships.

Chapter 7: Put Out the Welcome Mat

My tenure as president of Grasslands College began on August 1. I soon learned that we offered no postsecondary summer classes. The under-usage bothered me. Empty spaces are lost opportunities for community connection, openness, and inclusion at the school. Being visible in the community is necessary, but seeing the community in our spaces is equally important.

We needed to put out our welcome mat.

Earlier in my leadership career, I had a favorite coffee shop on campus. Ryan ran the coffee shop. One day, Ryan surprised me with an invitation to the launch of his newest location. As I entered, I was again surprised, this time by the somewhat sparse crowd.

Ryan greeted me; he was beaming. He explained that this was his “soft launch,” with invited guests being his most loyal customers, close friends, and some family.

Ryan’s soft launch inspired me to apply a similar strategy in opening our postsecondary spaces to the community. We quietly vocalized our intention to those already closest to us—current supporters, including staff and existing partners.

As the buzz grew organically within the community, more people came forward. We continued by connecting with organizations and businesses that aligned with our values and complemented our programs.

Part 3: Cultivating Internal Culture

Chapter 8: Company Culture Matters

In those early days as interim dean at Protest U, my new boss, the vice president, had directed me to begin my tenure by conducting a faculty review. In the hallways, I noticed of-fice doors closed and sensed uneasiness when I encountered employees. My faculty had a culture problem.

When employees feel uninspired or disconnected from an organization's mission, vision, and values or feel like they don't matter, there's a risk to your brand. My employees needed to feel they were first.

As a leader, I remind staff and stakeholders that my office door is always open. I noticed that few came for visits. It fairly screamed "power," confronting visitors with a large, expensive oak desk. I replaced it with a more modest surface that ran parallel to a side wall. The barrier was gone.

Then something interesting happened. A few months into my new role, a management team member began leaving her door open. Then another did. And as those doors opened, conversations took place, and people felt heard. Trust was building. Our culture was improving.

Our actions aligned with our words. Our internal community was building, and its inhabitants included staff and management. At Protest U, we came together and built a community—a team—and success followed.

Chapter 9: Lead by Example

How do we build social harmony in our workplaces? The previous chapter offered some solutions. Here, we'll focus on another facet of the construction process: modeling social harmony yourself.

It was the spring of 2020, and the world had just closed. At Protest U, we closed the campus and instructed faculty, students, and staff to work remotely, but it soon became clear that certain business functions required employees to be on-site. We had no option but to declare some workers essential and order them back to campus.

At the time, I felt like we were at war—battling a virus with life-or-death implications. There was no time for discussion. "This is war—follow my orders," I thought.

I was wrong.

In an environment of fear, I added to the uncertainty. By choosing not to show empathy and seek understanding, I wasn't walking the talk by modeling my expectations.

I called an online staff meeting for all who had been ordered back to work. I expressed my sincere desire for renewed dialogue and let them know that they were in a safe place to provide it. Months of fear and frustration poured out.

I admitted my mistakes, acknowledged my poor communication, and apologized. I had not been leading with consistency

at the precise moment that authentic leadership was most critically needed. And I finished by sharing with them how much our entire school community valued what they do.

Upon reflection, I have discovered that my actions are like a pebble dropped in a still pond—those ripples affect my team, which affects our clients, which affects our business, and all of it directly impacts our overall success or failure. So work on you first, then lead by design—by setting an example, by teaching and mentoring, and by investing in your people.

Chapter 10: Values-Based Hiring

The light was green. We were ready to offer the job to our first-choice candidate. Gavin was hired quickly and without broader consultation. On paper, he had the experience and checked most of the competency boxes. His hiring was a failure.

Across my first year, I'd used my voice to cultivate the values of regional cooperation. Gavin pointed the ship in the opposite direction, cultivating an "us versus them" mindset.

It was a wake-up call. Without shared values, alignment is impossible. We needed to start hiring for values fit.

Competencies still mattered, of course, but we started evolving our hiring practices, exploring their alignment with our values, voice, and vision.

But as well as our reimagined hiring process had worked, ensuring smooth integration to our culture was the first step, one as critical to employee (and organizational) success as the hiring process itself.

Whatever an employee's pay grade, the recruitment process is a two-way street. It is as critical that the candidate is sure they want to work at your organization as it is that the organization wants them on the team.

Chapter 11: Communication and Celebration

When I started my role as director of Protest U's conservatory of music, I learned there was tension between two opposing groups: those associated with curating the onstage talent and those who supported the facility and its events.

Alan wasn't management, but he was the most senior and most respected member of the Back-Stagers. He approached me one day and asked if we could chat.

Thanks to Alan's ice-breaking, I soon started meeting with the Back-Stagers' management team. We got to know each other as people and leaders and gave voice to our values and vision.

With time, it became normal to see Center- and Back-Stagers talking in the concert hall lobby, the hallways, even in each other's offices.

Another year and still more progress led to Protest U's senior admin nominating the Center-Stagers and Back-Stagers for the university's Efficiency Team Award at the annual employee appreciation event.

We won!

We'd created an internal community, and together, we served our external community. The catalysts: communication and celebration.

Conclusion: The Engagement Advantage

Reflecting on my lived experiences, every success has had one common denominator: community engagement, both internal and external. It all begins with getting out there—and bringing your values with you.

At its core, leadership is a personal journey of self-discovery, learning to connect, and building partnerships.

Wherever your leadership path takes you, it is my sincere hope that you find your authentic self and lead your teams to become more purposeful and impactful than they ever thought possible.



Brad Mahon, MBA, PhD, has enjoyed more than 25 years as a leader in higher education. His experience spans from the classroom to the boardroom, always with an emphasis on engaging the community. As a college president and past university dean, Brad passionately advocates for providing learners with transformative educational experiences and aligning institutions with the communities they serve. Collaboration and cooperation are hallmarks of his administrative tenures, including establishing strategic partnerships with other educational institutions, community organizations, and industry.

Leadership Is Personal: How Community and Culture Lead to Business Success by Brad Mahon ©2025 by Brad Mahon. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Forbes Books. ISBN 979-8891880719. Summary published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®. Copyright 2025 Soundview, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited. For permissions and reprints, please contact service@summary.com. 47SS06A