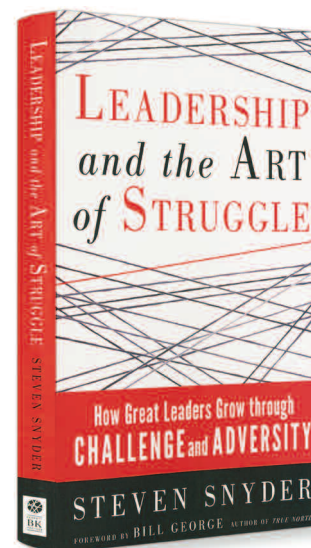




# Leadership and the Art of Struggle

## How Great Leaders Grow Through Challenge and Adversity



by Steven Snyder

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Leadership is often a struggle, and yet strong taboos keep us from talking openly and honestly about our difficulties for fear of looking weak and seeming to lack confidence. But *Leadership and the Art of Struggle* shows that this discussion is vital — adversity is precisely what unlocks our greatest potential.

Using real-life stories drawn from his extensive research studying 151 diverse episodes of leadership struggle — as well as from his experiences working with Bill Gates in the early years of Microsoft and as a CEO and executive coach — Steven Snyder shows how to navigate intense challenges to achieve personal growth and organizational success. He details strategies for embracing struggle and offers a host of unique tools and hands-on practices to help you implement them.

By mastering the art of struggle, you'll be better equipped to meet life's challenges and focus on what matters most.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to stay grounded in the midst of struggle.
- How to turn your energy into adaptive energy to become resilient.
- How to make sense of a chaotic world.
- How to navigate tensions by finding new, creative paths.
- How to savor the leadership marathon.

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: LEADERSHIP AND THE ART OF STRUGGLE

by Steven Snyder

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## PART 1: BECOMING GROUNDED

### Struggle Is Not a Four-Letter Word

Many leaders unconsciously categorize the word “struggle” as negative and off-putting, a taboo, which makes dealing with struggle even more difficult than it needs to be. This can become especially problematic when leaders find themselves facing significant challenges.

When external pressures for positive spin create dissonance with reality, leaders may ignore the incongruity they feel in their guts and stifle the candid conversations that could guide them forward. They may unconsciously compare themselves with others and allow this comparison to diminish their self-image and curb their potential. They may fall into the trap of thinking that leaders are supposed to be perfect or at least perfectly capable of dealing with struggle. Consequently, they can feel embarrassed and stigmatized, thinking, *Something must be wrong with me. I'm not like all the other successful leaders out there.*

But, of course, no leader is perfect. All human beings have their own unique flaws and frailties. And, of course, struggle is a natural part of leadership.

Instead of denying struggle, or feeling some degree of shame, savvy leaders embrace struggle as an opportunity for growth and learning, as an art to be mastered. They come to see struggle as a universal rite of passage without allowing themselves to become mired in it.

#### Defining Elements of Leadership Struggle

Struggle occurs when a difficult or complex situation arises that presents some challenge or adversity. The details can vary considerably from beginning a new job

or confronting a major disappointment to facing a difficult decision or managing an unexpected external event. But in all examples there are three fundamental conditions that determine the nature of the struggle and serve as its defining elements: change, tensions and being out of balance.

**Change.** Change stands at the heart of leadership struggle. Every struggle is triggered by some type of change. Change may be imposed on a leader by a new set of enterprise-related circumstances caused by loss of key personnel, financial constraints, competitive pressure or some other setback.

External change, whether desired or not, always carries with it seeds of opportunity and growth. The struggle may come from discerning the best way to take advantage of those opportunities or how to do so with limited resources.

In still other cases, change comes from deep within a leader's inner world. As the heart and the mind expand to take in new ideas, feelings and perspectives, struggle comes from the process of clarifying newly emerging values and identity.

**Tensions.** The process of change creates a natural set of tensions, the second defining element of leadership struggle. Tension points stem from individual and institutional traditions (past) and aspirations (future) as well as (outward) relationships and (inward) identity.

**Being out of balance.** The third element of leadership struggle is that change and its ensuing tensions throw a leader off balance. Sometimes the imbalance is felt in subtle ways: a quiet voice, a nagging concern in the leader's gut, or reluctance toward or procrastination of an important task. Sometimes the fears are deeper and the emotions are more powerful. A leader may lose



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confidence and feel the weight of the world on his or her shoulders. ●

## Adaptive Energy

Adaptive energy is the force that propels you to reach your dreams, pointing you toward the goal line and warning you when you veer off course. It aligns your actions both with the *external* criteria necessary for success and with your *inner* values and principles. Through adaptive energy you listen to and assess feedback from multiple sources and incorporate this new learning in future actions, all the while remaining true to yourself.

Harnessing adaptive energy can inspire you to come up with innovative ideas when no immediate solution is evident. It can also steer you to build lasting and fulfilling relationships. Even though your interactions might involve conflict, you gain the acuity and the agility to manage the conflict so that it does not stand in the way of what needs to be done.

Everyone has negative thoughts and bad moods, but leaders who can access their adaptive energy are able to channel their adverse emotions into creativity and goal-oriented pursuits.

All leaders have the potential to channel their energy in ways that are adaptive and aligned with their purpose. How they do that is the central question. As an art, leadership struggle cannot be reduced to a simple formula, but a key concept is this: The more self-aware you are, the more capable you will be of adaptively channeling your behavior. Leaders who wish to become more self-aware need to understand the nature of their automatic and reflective minds.

### The Automatic and Reflective Minds

The *automatic mind*, the faster one, reaches judgments and conclusions quickly but often prematurely, making associations with information already stored and easily accessible. Many people intuitively call it “automatic pilot,” with the connotation that decisions are made routinely, out of habit, subject to preprogrammed routines.

The *reflective mind* is slower and more methodical. It is capable of reason, logic and metathought — the process of consciously observing one’s own thought process, as if looking down on oneself from the balcony. It challenges assumptions, generates multiple alternatives and evaluates them systematically, and is capable of objective analysis. It is the spark for conscious and intentional action. But it tends to be lazy, often ceding control to the automatic mind, which can lead to regrettable consequences. ●

## Turn Your Energy Into Adaptive Energy

Consider two leaders who set out on a complex and difficult endeavor. Let’s call them FM and GM. FM and GM are equally matched with respect to their abilities and motivation, yet these two leaders approach a task very differently. FM, a cyclone of unfocused energy, does not learn from feedback opportunities and appears frenetic, chaotic and haphazard overall. GM is more organized and systematic and carefully considers all feedback. FM’s counterproductive whirlwind is no match for GM’s logical and calibrated approach, and GM easily outperforms FM by a significant margin. What can account for such radical differences?

It turns out that FM and GM were prototypical participants in a very clever psychological experiment. FM refers to those who approached the task with a *fixed mindset* — the assumption that their abilities were innate and not subject to change. GM refers to those who approached the task with a *growth mindset* — the belief that their ability level was nothing more than a snapshot in time and eminently changeable as they continued to learn and develop.

### A Fixed Mindset

Psychologist Carol Dweck argues that conditioning, beginning at a very young age, implicitly imposes a fixed mindset. Virtually every adult has at some point told a youngster who did something well, “You are so smart!” According to Dweck, such messages build a belief that it is our inherent smartness that leads to good performance, not the effort that is exerted.

When things go well, we think it’s because of how smart we are. When things don’t turn out as we had hoped, we begin to doubt our ability.

This mental model is a proven recipe for suboptimal performance over the long term. It becomes especially problematic when individuals with a fixed mindset suffer a setback or make a mistake. They automatically associate their disappointing performance with an immutable deficit in abilities. This can diminish their confidence and spark an escalating spiral of negative emotion as they compare themselves unfavorably with others. More time spent in negative ideation means less time thinking about creative ways to improve performance.

### A Growth Mindset

A leader with a growth mindset is consciously aware that ability is not innate and unchangeable but instead a malleable quality that can continuously be augmented

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through practice and persistence. In a growth mindset, you pay conscious attention to cultivating abilities through continuous learning. You seek out new learning opportunities by pursuing challenging assignments instead of taking safer and easier routes.

The first step in adopting a growth mindset is to pay attention to what's going on around you and give the reflective mind a mandate to take control. You can begin simply by elevating your awareness. ●

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### Making Sense of a Chaotic World

Seeking to discern the specific tensions underlying a challenging situation is a good next step toward managing through the complexity. With a better understanding of how these tensions work, you will gain a clearer perspective and make better choices.

Not only is change at the heart of leadership struggle, it is also a source of the emotional and physical tension a leader feels as a result of that struggle. Joe Dowling's story captures the multifaceted relationships among change, tension and struggle. His cautionary tale also illustrates four tension points that grow out of struggle: tensions of tradition, tensions of aspiration, tensions of relationships and tensions of identity.

#### Power Struggle

When in 1978 Joe Dowling landed the top job of artistic director at the Abbey Theatre, the National Theatre of Ireland, he made a big splash. At 28, he was the youngest artistic director in the theater's history.

Dowling's vision for the Abbey and for himself as artistic director was thwarted by disagreements with the board of directors. Stemming from a time when there was no professional management, the board made all the important decisions, including the selection of plays.

Dowling brought a very different understanding of the respective roles of the board and its artistic director. He saw the artistic director as the CEO, who should command considerably more authority in the theater's management, including the selection of plays. Dowling was eager to steer the Abbey in this direction, which put him in direct conflict with the board.

• **Tensions of Tradition.** Throughout its history until Dowling arrived, the Abbey's board had played an integral role in the management of the theater. Perhaps the board did not see as clearly as Dowling did the opportunities that professional management could afford.

At the Abbey, however, play selection was more than a matter of management and artistic vision. The board

saw itself as a steward of a national institution, whose mission was, in Dowling's words, to "reflect back to a nation itself, through theater."

Tensions of tradition occur as leaders confront the implications of breaking with patterns from which they and others have become accustomed. In organizations these practices are generally rooted in previous adaptations; at some point in the past, they were most likely healthy and appropriate.

• **Tensions of Relationships.** In any organization, managing relationships is critical to getting things done. But even more important, relationships form the basis of connection from one human being to another that can bring fulfillment in everyday exchanges. In a healthy relationship, virtually every interaction generates positive energy. Even when there is a difference of opinion, respectful dialogue can build trust and foster mutual satisfaction.

At the Abbey, the opposite seemed to be true. Interactions between Dowling and the board did not build positive energy and in many cases were an energy drain.

• **Tensions of Aspiration.** Tensions of aspiration are forward looking. They arise as an organization mobilizes around a dream or vision for the future. Sometimes these tensions bubble to the surface when different stakeholders bring different visions or values into proposed solutions or goals, as was the case at the Abbey Theatre. Sometimes they manifest when short-term incentive systems do not completely align with long-term organizational values. Sometimes the culprit is sheer ambition, as tensions manifest through the natural energy that is created when people with differing agendas work together on difficult endeavors in which more than one path appears viable.

• **Tensions of Identity.** Tensions of identity can occur as leaders wrestle with issues surrounding their values, integrity and authenticity. These tensions are the ones that can shape a leader's character and have a lasting impact. It is in these defining moments that leaders grapple with the core issues of who they are and what they stand for.

In Dowling's case, tensions had escalated to such a level that he could see no viable solution other than to publicly confront the board through his resignation. In his mind the issue of his authority became a matter of principle.

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As Dowling's story unfolds, the tensions both escalate and proliferate. All the while, he is experiencing increasingly intense emotions that throw him further off balance. Ultimately, Dowling reached the point of total exhaustion.

After leaving the Abbey, Dowling was named artistic director of the Guthrie Theater. Dowling would come to understand that his confrontational style may have obscured a blind spot — something he was not aware of or did not recognize as a problem. On one hand, Dowling yearned to be part of a mission that was larger than his personal aspirations. On the other hand, he needed autonomy and freedom to shape the vision of the institution. The paradox is that to be part of a larger mission, he needed to make space for the visions of other stakeholders who yearned to be part of that larger mission, as well. The supportive environment at the Guthrie was a perfect place to resolve this paradox. In so doing, Dowling has emerged as a remarkable leader.

During Dowling's chaotic struggle at the Abbey, he had not yet learned that winning personal battles of power is not as lucrative as the win-win outcomes that evolve when people move from "I" to "we" and open up a larger space for creative collaboration. Ultimately, his struggle would lead him to a place where he achieved this learning, realized more of his full potential as a visionary artistic director, and yet was also part of a larger mission.

Dowling's tumultuous tenure at the Abbey Theatre illustrates how easy it is to be thrown off balance during a struggle episode. When egos and expectations clash, emotions can overwhelm rationality. It's a leader's job to make some semblance of sense out of chaos. The first step is to gain a clear understanding of what's causing the underlying tension. With a clear grasp of these tension points, a leader can become centered and determine the best way to navigate through the tension. ●

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### Regain Balance

#### Center Your Mind, Body and Spirit

All leaders need some way to anchor and balance themselves in times of turbulence when forces beyond their control begin swirling around them with chaotic intensity.

Leaders use a variety of practices to remain centered and grounded. Some focus on diet and exercise. Some seek to connect with something greater than themselves, either through organized religion or a more secular spir-

itual connection. Some find peace and tranquility by deeply connecting with nature. Others seek calmness and clarity through journaling. Many create their own unique blend of these practices and others.

One particular practice seems to function on a higher plane, transcending these other more traditional approaches. This is the practice of *mindfulness*. The central focus is awareness. Mindfulness practices teach us to become more aware and more fully present while remaining peaceful within, even as chaos rages all around.

Through the practice of mindfulness, we learn to objectively observe ourselves during stressful situations — as if both experiencing the situation and simultaneously watching ourselves. The simple reflective act of naming our emotions as we experience them grants us a new power to more intentionally choose how we respond.

The practice of mindfulness trains us to maintain awareness of the space between our thoughts, short-circuiting the knee-jerk reactions of the automatic mind and engaging the reflective mind in creative new ways. As the automatic mind cedes authority to the reflective mind, the speed of life slows down, allowing us to consciously choose more-thoughtful responses to difficult and challenging situations.

#### Find the Support You Need

In this section our focus is directed outward so that you can develop relationships and support systems to connect with others, seek their guidance, learn from their experiences and receive valuable feedback. All the while you will be receiving the nurturing energy — and perhaps a healthy dose of tough love — that's inherent in supportive relationships.

First write down all the people you can rely on for support. Now make a list of your needs for support. Don't just think of your current needs; think also of what your long-term needs may be as you develop and grow in your career. Think of the types of people you need who can guide, advise and inspire you on your journey.

Remember, an integral part of the art of struggle is breaking out of old patterns and creating new habits to channel your energies in adaptive ways. Creating a community of people whom you can connect and bond with and from whom you can seek advice and feedback is a great way to get started. ●

## PART 2: EXPLORING NEW PATHWAYS

### Navigate Tensions

Two strategies can guide you through navigating your tension:

*Focus on the situation*, packed full of tension, and think of a creative way to reimagine the situation that enables you to get through it.

*Focus on you*. Figure out how you contribute to the tensions and how you might change.

As you explore these new pathways, try to break loose from the world that exists today and imagine the world that is possible tomorrow. Aim high, engage your adaptive energy and search for solutions until you find the path that's right for you.

#### Reflective Exercise: Reimagine Your Situation

Try to envision a pathway through whatever challenges you're facing. To get started, consider the following questions:

- *Do you feel that the pressures of the short term are keeping you from important long-term tasks?* Author Stephen Covey popularized a time management matrix that consisted of four quadrants: important urgent, important not urgent, not important urgent, and not important not urgent. He recommended clearing all the not important stuff off your plate so that you have more time to deal with the important issues, urgent or not.

- *Do the obstacles ahead make you question whether your goals are really attainable?* In any difficult situation, there are bound to be times when you don't see a clear path to your goal — or the path you do see is obscured by roadblocks and minefields. Perhaps different people have different visions for the future, with those disagreements diverting energy away from charging forward. It may be that organizational incentives are not aligned with what the organization has asked you to do.

Whatever is going on, the key is aligning your adaptive energy to break out of old habits and expand the menu of alternatives you consider.

#### Reflective Exercise: Reinventing Yourself to Adapt to Your Current Situation

Answer these questions:

Are my old models and styles of leadership working for me right now?

What do I need to change about myself to better adapt to my current situation?

Probe the underlying models, assumptions and philosophies that frame your leadership. Leadership growth often means shedding outdated approaches in exchange for newer, more adaptive ones.

Remarkable transformations are sparked by some underlying tension that acts as a catalyst for change. Try to identify a behavior you're engaging in that may be creating unnecessary tension in your workplace, then consciously work to put a stop to it. You may be surprised to see how a situation cools down when you stop stoking the fire. ●

### Illuminate Blind Spots

I'm defining blind spot here as anything that can hinder or undermine your performance that you are either unaware of or have chosen to overlook. My research has identified five different types of blind spots: experience, personality, values, strategic and conflict.

**Experience Blind Spots.** The experience blind spot is most likely to come into play when leaders move to a new role or a new company. They arrive so eager to show off what they know that they don't pay close enough attention to their new circumstances. The experience blind spot can also be problematic when leaders have become entrenched in a job and something significant changes in the environment.

**Personality Blind Spots.** Just as past experience can produce tunnel vision in leaders who are not self-aware enough to notice it, the structure of your personality — your predisposition to think and act in certain ways — can lead you to erroneously process information and miss subtle cues unless you are self-aware enough to monitor your thoughts and make appropriate course corrections.

**Values Blind Spots.** Values blind spots occur when a leader's attitude and actions are not aligned with core values. Unfortunately, not all values blind spots become illuminated in time and some can have far-reaching consequences. Remember, a blind spot doesn't necessarily mean that you are unaware of a problem; blind spots can occur even if you have some level of awareness but fail to take appropriate action.

**Strategic Blind Spots.** Experience, personality and values blind spots focus largely on individual failings. Strategic blind spots cast a wider net because their influence is felt on a larger level, affecting a group, a company or an institution. They are products of a collective worldview that becomes self-reinforcing around a set of practices, assumptions or beliefs yet are potentially maladaptive for the long-term health of the organization.

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There are often incentives, either explicit or implicit, that reward conformance to the norm and punish critical or questioning voices. These incentives, which often are tied to short-term objectives, can detract attention from critical long-term implications, hindering open, honest dialogue and cogent analysis. Strategic blind spots can occur in virtually any area of an organization. Any initiative, practice or custom is a potential focus point.

**Conflict Blind Spots.** This last blind spot takes center stage when a struggle involves significant elements of destructive conflict — conflict so extreme that it interferes with the mission of the organization. When a conflict intensifies, perceptions can become significantly distorted. Everyone convinces themselves that they are right and the other person is wrong.

The conflict blind spot can cause someone to interpret every interaction through a distorted lens. Even if the other person did not intend any harm, the blind spot reinforces the perception that the other person is in the wrong, intensifying the emotions. This leads to further escalation, and the pattern becomes more ingrained. Issues become blown out of proportion, and emotions boil over.

By definition, you are blind to your blind spots. That's why it's so important to proactively seek to discover them.

Preventing blind spots from undermining your leadership requires rigorous, continuous discipline. Awareness is the first step, but the best leaders learn how to become their own change agent. ●

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### Transcend Conflict

A certain amount of conflict can be healthy, especially in an atmosphere of trust. Diverse viewpoints can be expressed. Challenges to the status quo can push learning and innovation. Issues can be debated openly, often leading to better solutions. The trouble comes when the energy driving the conflict moves from positive and productive to negative and counterproductive. Conflict can then become destructive, often with disabling effects, undermining the very objectives to which the participants aspire.

Destructive conflict can occur between a boss and subordinate, colleagues within a team, two departments or business units within a company, or business partners. The power dynamics can vary greatly, depending on circumstances.

The deep feelings of distrust in destructive conflict are often accompanied by fears of diminished power.

Motivations for every idea and action are called into question. Such a toxic environment does not support the high energy, creativity and synergy that participants would ordinarily strive to bring to their projects. But we live in an imperfect world, and acknowledgment that we live in the world as it is, is foundational to recognizing the potential for growth in any situation, even in the midst of destructive conflict.

It's crucial to keep in mind that the people you are in conflict with are flawed human beings like yourself, with insecurities, fears, and emotional and psychological wounds — all of which color the way they perceive other people, the world and the nature of conflict itself. Honoring the human face of conflict is the first step toward resolving that conflict in the healthiest way possible. ●

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### Discover Purpose and Meaning Through Struggle

The choices you make — large and small — are the most vivid expression of your leadership. They reflect who you are as a person. It's one thing to talk about your values, but through the actions you take and the choices you make, they become visible for the whole world to see.

You may already have a vision statement. If you do, find it and read it. You may even want to read it aloud so that you can hear the sounds of the words. Does it still feel right to you? Do your current circumstances suggest any changes?

With your vision clearly articulated, you are better equipped to assess how well your current activities are aligned with that vision. You can start by taking another look at the hard questions you asked yourself earlier: Do I feel energized by what I am doing in my career and in my life? Does it fill me with meaning and purpose? What's keeping it from being satisfying?

Now take it one step further. Ask yourself, Am I willing to rededicate myself to my current endeavors, or do I need to segue to something new? And if I do choose a new route, what should it be?

Essentially, you have three options: The first is to recommit to your current direction. The second is to pivot, or make a midcourse correction. The third option is to make a more dramatic leap, perhaps into a totally new arena, far beyond the comfort zone of your previous experiences. ●

### PART 3: DEEPENING ADAPTIVE ENERGY

#### Peer Into the Future

Good leaders learn to intuit the link between their current circumstances and future potentialities. They develop the capacity to supplement logic and reason with the intuitive ability to synthesize an almost endless array of variables to anticipate what the future might hold.

Through effort and experience, you can sharpen your intuition and become more adept at orchestrating the delicate dance between your automatic and reflective mental processes.

You can learn to anticipate and prepare for the future in several ways. You can envision opportunities — changes in markets, technology or competition — that create windows for innovation and ingenuity. You can learn how to anticipate potential obstacles — constraints and pitfalls that could potentially derail your plans. You can nurture your adaptive energy by growing your skills and capabilities to tap into the potential of what's ahead.

#### Prepare for What Lies Ahead

Spending time with Bill Gates in his formative leadership years gave me a privileged perch for observation. It turns out that Gates' sagacity and insight do not stem solely from innate genius. He surrounds himself with very smart people, and he's a voracious reader. Every year he goes off for what he calls "think week." He takes a mountain of books (or nowadays, perhaps, an electronic book reader), pores through them and sifts through the nuggets upon which he wants to act.

You too can become hyperinquisitive and actively seek out the thought leaders in your industry or field. Get yourself connected and inspired. Attend professional conferences or idea conferences, like TED or the Aspen Ideas Festival. If you can't go in person, search the Web; a lot of great talks are available for free. Talk to smart people. Follow thought-provoking blogs. Read books. Create your own vision for the future.

It is not always easy to identify which skills will help you maximize your leadership potential. But one core leadership capability that is crucial to the theme here is emotional intelligence, which implies self-awareness, the maturity to manage your own emotional state and the ability to notice social cues so as to maintain good relationships with others. ●

#### Savor the Marathon

"Leadership is a marathon, not a sprint," an astute leader told me. Like long-distance runners who take in nourishment along the way, you need to continually nourish yourself, replenishing the energy you've lost and sustaining yourself through life's difficulties, all the while continuing your path of growth and mastery.

Great leaders bring a high level of discipline to their roles and their lives. This discipline manifests in the form of habits — behavioral routines that play out over and over again. Typically, these routines produce some kind of reward of which you may or may not be fully conscious. The trick is to find just the right routine and just the right reward to transform your habits into a self-perpetuating adaptive engine.

#### Celebrate What's Precious

As you race through your life, pursuing your goals and ambitions, you may find it transformative, as I did, to continually remind yourself to slow down — to breathe, to notice, to celebrate what is precious.

What is it that you appreciate? What are those special moments with family and friends or colleagues that are etched in your mind and maybe even on your soul that nourish you each time you recall them? Do you have a habit of pausing to express your appreciation?

At the end of the day it is best to not judge ourselves by how our own life measures up to that of other individuals. Instead, a more useful yardstick is how well we find our unique path, tapping into our potential, becoming the best person we can possibly be.

The art of struggle lies not in achievements but in the ripples from the journey and how we've grown along the way — the lives we've touched, the kindness we've shown, the ways we've brought to life our most important values. It is the accumulation of all of life's choices, big and small, that creates our unique and personal gift to the world — the world we will bestow on our children. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Leadership and the Art of Struggle*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Truth About Leadership* by Barry Z. Posner and James Kouzes.** Posner and Kouzes share 10 time-tested fundamental truths about leadership and becoming an effective leader.
2. ***Leadership Gold* by John C. Maxwell.** Maxwell shares a lifetime of leadership truths, which can guide anyone who currently leads or aspires to lead.
3. ***The Inspiring Leader* by Scott Edinger, John H. Zenger, Joseph R. Folkman.** The authors discuss the behaviors exhibited by the most successful leaders and includes advice on how to implement them.