



Choosing to Lead Your Life in a More Excellent Way By John E. Michel, Senior Curator at GeneralLeadership.com

Different is good.

In fact, I believe different can be very, very good.

Of course, thinking and being different than those around you is easier said than done. After all, going against the flow, thinking outside the box, or deviating from what everyone else is doing is almost certainly uncomfortable, if not outright unsettling.

But what if I were to tell you being different is exactly what's needed to flourish and thrive in today's dynamic, fast-paced, ever-changing world? At a time in our nation's history when we need more people to step up to help make a positive difference in our homes, workplaces, worship spaces, and communities, it seems many of us are content to merely settle. We are more intent sticking with the perceived safety of the status quo than to risk taking a stand for what we truly believe is worth fighting for in our lives.

And that's a big mistake.

You see, everywhere we look today the status quo is hard at work convincing us it's better to stay put and keep doing more of the same. Be it doing the same unrewarding job, sticking with the same unhealthy relationship or promoting the same dysfunctional politics, the status quo strives to keep us narrowly and selfishly focused. Divided instead of united, it compels us to work on individual agendas instead of working toward collective solutions to persistent personal, professional, or societal problems.

In our own lives, allowing the status quo to have its way with us serves as a barrier to forward motion. It creates individual, organizational, and relational obstacles that keep us from becoming the best version of ourselves. Be it a destructive habit, a persistent problem, or an undeveloped skill, the status quo strives to keep us squarely in our comfort zones and subtly persuades us *to accept mediocrity as the norm*...lulling us into adopting what I term *a mediocre me mindset*.



"We are all born originals - why is it so many of us die copies?"
Edward Young



Our Senior Curator, John Michel, is a widely recognized expert in culture, strategy & individual and organizational change. An accomplished unconventional leader and proven status quo buster, he has successfully led several multi-billion dollar transformation efforts and his award-winning work has been featured in a wide variety of articles and journals, including the Harvard Business Review. In addition to serving our nation as an active duty General Officer in the United States Air Force, John enjoys helping people learn to walk differently in the world so they can become the best version of themselves possible. He is blessed to be married to the most patient person on the planet and together, they have two amazing sons. You are encouraged to learn more about John at his website, www.MediocreMe.com or online at www.GeneralLeadership.com

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A Mediocre Me Mindset

The dictionary aptly defines mediocrity as, “*moderate to inferior in quality.*” Derived from the French term of the same spelling, mediocre literally means, “halfway up the mountain.” It insinuates how accepting mediocrity is to fail to achieve one’s objective or fall short of attaining one’s potential.

In our own lives, accepting mediocrity as the norm prevents us from becoming the best possible version of ourselves. It strives to keep us squarely in our comfort zones and subtly persuades us to settle for so much less than we are capable of achieving. For example, despite our knowing there is a different way or a different plan that could help us move in the direction of our dreams, aspirations, and objectives, mediocrity convinces us to disengage and do or say nothing. And why shouldn’t we? After all, going along with the herd instead of doing something to break from established convention is certainly safe. It can:

- Keep us from risking our well thought out career paths;
- Prevent us from disrupting our finely honed promotion plans; or
- Protect us from venturing too far outside our tightly scripted personal lines of responsibility so we can keep our circumstances secure, predictable, and above all, controllable.

But any way you try to rationalize it, choosing to consistently settle for less than we are capable of doing and being hurts far more than it ever helps.

Now please don’t get me wrong. We have all undoubtedly found ourselves in that awkwardly comfortable position of settling at one time or another on this journey we call life. But the real problem occurs when settling becomes the norm. Like a good habit gone bad; an addiction gone wild, the price of routinely settling for mediocrity and refusing to bring our best selves to whatever it is we are doing costs all of us dearly.

But the good news is it doesn’t have to remain this way.

I believe every one of us, regardless of where we find ourselves in the proverbial hierarchy, social order, or organizational chart can expand our view of the potential role we can play in the world. How, you ask? Simply by beginning to exert a very powerful form of *personal leadership*.

What I mean is, instead of thinking about leadership in narrow terms, such as believing we must possess a particular title, rank, or role before we can initiate the positive change we want to see occur in our surroundings, I believe leadership is more a *choice*. Specifically, it’s a choice to try and transform the raw material of our lives into something that will add value to the world around us.

In simplest terms, I believe leadership is more a verb than noun. More about *disposition* than it is *position*, leadership is living out the belief that there is no problem or challenge too big to tackle, no solution too elusive for us to discover when we are committed to leading the change we want to see—one opportunity at a time.



Seven Choices to Emulate

Does this sound too farfetched, or idealistic or straight forward to be true?

I certainly don't think so. Let me share with you the seven choices emulated by the world's most effective change leaders. And the best part is, none of these choices demand we pursue further training, acquire specific titles, or develop special skills in order to get started building greater value into our surroundings. They merely require we choose to say no to the status quo and yes to doing something, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem in the moment, to try and lead our lives in more excellent ways. And we can get started right now by striving to routinely:

1. **Live Your Truth:** It is easy and often convenient to tell ourselves lies about our potential, just as it is easy to live in fear of what other people will think or say about us. But if we are intent on leaving the world better than we found it, we must learn to live our personal sense of truth and embrace who we are. Truth must remain our constant companion, a cherished friend that enables us to stand and fight when others cower and flee.

Left to their own accord, many people allow the world to define their truth. And the fact is the world is more than happy to oblige. However, choosing to not fall prey to this flawed line of thinking demands we not bemoan how bad things currently are, but instead act on opportunities to reveal how good things can be. Living our sense of personal truth should compel us not to walk past injustice, tolerate mediocrity, or bend our will merely to find acceptance and popularity.

2. **Develop New Eyes to See:** I recently read about a man in Maine who, for one morning every month, pretends to be blind. He wakes without opening his eyes, fumbles his way to his kitchen to make coffee then heads off to the bathroom to shower and brush his teeth. He eats a bowl of cold cereal and dresses himself and doesn't open his eyes until he gets behind the wheel of his car to go to work. He does this so he can appreciate the many gifts in his life, among them the gift of sight.

In today's world, it is easy to become entitled, losing sight of the things that really matter. Don't let this be you. Resolve to build habits in your life that will help you remain grateful for all you possess. It will make you a happier, healthier, more successful person inside and out.

3. **Never give up on People:** All of us walk through the world with our own baggage. We begin acquiring these burdens as children and they accumulate as we walk through life. The challenge that arises, however, is that over time we begin to get so weighed down by our past experiences it impacts how we deal with our present circumstances--leading us to be less patient, trustful and accommodating than we should be with others.

We should never forget that life is first and foremost about relationships. None of us were created to proceed through our journey alone. But when we begin to allow our past hurts, disappointments, fears or failures influence how we interact with the people around us, we begin replacing love, patience, and kindness with jealousy, possessiveness, and suspicion, thus causing us to lead lives far smaller and narrower than we were meant to lead.

The reality of the matter is, people are sometimes going to let you down. This is a fact of life. It is our responsibility to not give up on people but rather to commit to doing what we can to always believe the best and strive to bring out the best in them. Trust me. It will make a profoundly positive difference in the quality of your life and the quality of your relationships.



- 4. Strive to be of Service:** Serving others is the highest form of human expression and has long been known to be the key to true physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health and happiness. Yet we must keep in mind it isn't an act of kindness if you expect something in return. Once you remove the payoff from the equation, you will find yourself catapulted to the next level of true selflessness, understanding that the reward for loving is love; the reward for serving others is being of service; the reward for leading well is doing your part to leave the world better than your first found it.

The self-esteem that comes from reaching out and helping other people is invaluable. It gets us out of our own heads and helps us not feel overwhelmed by problems or other concerns. It helps us feel connected and represents the essence of what it means to lead a life of true purpose, meaning, and significance.

- 5. Focus on the Present:** We sometimes spend too much time obsessing over things that have happened and dreading some unforeseen future that we forget the simple truth that, right now, it is this moment that matters most. Life is played out in forward motion. There are no pause buttons, no opportunities to rewind. Although the past can certainly teach us valuable lessons, it shouldn't be our focus.

You have plans, obligations and aspirations. We all do. But keep in mind that right now is the greatest opportunity we have to experience joy, peace, and satisfaction. When things get hectic, remind yourself of this and get centered. After all, your past is inescapable, your future is unavoidable, but your present can be truly enjoyable. Of course, this is only possible if you will allow yourself to make the most of it.

- 6. Seek to Understand Others:** Franklin Lavin, former U.S. Ambassador to Singapore, once shared a story about Ronald Reagan in the Wall Street Journal that I have never forgotten.

The former President was making an appearance at an Alabama school for handicapped children. The event was going very well, until one of the children with a severe speech impediment asked a question of the President. No one in the audience could understand and the room became tense. The President asked him to repeat the question, and the energy in the room began to deflate. Again, no one understood what the child was trying to say.

Here is how Lavin tells what happened next, *"The teachers froze. What was to have been an upbeat day was turning into a disaster... Reagan to the rescue. 'I'm sorry' he said with a smile, 'but you know I've got this hearing aid in my ear. Every once in a while the darn thing just conks out on me. And it's just gone dead. Sorry to put you through this again, but I'm going to ask one of my staff people to go over to you so you can tell them directly what your question is. Then he can pass it back to me.'"*

This is what leading your life in a more excellent way is about. It is the willingness to withhold judgment, refrain from impatience and strive to really understand the person in front of you. It's showing you truly care through your attitudes and actions.

- 7. Be Content With You:** I cannot tell you how many people I've come across who spend an enormous amount of energy searching for some sort of outside "thing" to fix them. As I travel to various locations teaching seminars on how to consistently and intentionally bring out the best in ourselves, others, and our organizations, I'm always amazed at how many people fail to realize the key to true satisfaction and success isn't around them, but within them. Inner peace comes from accepting this as your truth.

Granted, there are things about ourselves that we all would like to change. This is not only natural, it is required if we are intent on growing into the best possible version of ourselves. Yet we must never lose sight of the fact that outside things we pursue or strive to acquire are insufficient in themselves to enrich the quality of our lives. None of these things are the ultimate source of our personal power.



It is only when we've found, accepted, and learned to love ourselves for who we are today, while remaining ever vigilant to act on opportunities to grow into the person we are capable of becoming tomorrow, that we begin to understand we have all been put here by a loving God for a purpose. And that purpose is to do our part every day to help make the world a little better than we first found it—one opportunity at a time.

Why should you consider taking this advice to heart? Because surveys confirm that the desire to achieve something meaningful and significant in and through our lives is important. In fact, reams of research affirms millions of us – more than three out of every four adults – say we are interested in making a positive difference in the world. We want to become the best version of ourselves and have our lives characterized by such terms as relevant, significant, and dare I say, *excellent*.

But this won't happen by accident. We have to choose to transform ordinary moments in life into opportunities to build value into our surroundings. After all, we cannot expect to build a successful organization, or enjoy mutually beneficial relationships, or achieve anything of real value if we aren't willing to replace a *mediocre me* mindset with a resolute commitment to making the most of the moment by moment opportunities to courageously guide, inspire, and shape the course of events in our sphere of influence.

Change Begins In You!

Maya Angelou, a celebrated American author and poet, once shared that courage is the most important of all virtues because without it, you cannot practice any of the others consistently. It takes courage to be true to yourself; just as it takes courage to develop new eyes to see; to never give up on people; to strive to be of service; to focus on the present rather than be paralyzed by the past; to genuinely and lovingly accept others; and to be content with who we are today while striving to grow closer to our potential tomorrow. It takes courage to be different from the crowd and commit to leading our lives in a more excellent way.

Remember, change always begins in our mind. The way we choose to think determines the way we feel and the way we feel influences the way we act. If we allow ourselves to be filled with fear of the future, we limit our ability to change and the status quo will continue to have its way with us. But if we are open to going against the flow, thinking outside the box, or deviating from what everyone else is doing in order to prompt positive change in our surroundings, there is no limit to what we can do.

Serving as yet another reminder that each and everyone one of us are already as much of a leader as we *choose* to be.



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