

Great Leaders GROW

Becoming a Leader for Life

**Ken Blanchard
& Mark Miller**



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We dedicate this book to the men and women
who inspired us to grow and helped us along the way.



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Introduction

Have you ever felt like you could lead at a higher level but you weren't quite sure how to get there? Have you ever wondered how to strengthen your influence and increase your impact? Have you ever considered what enables some leaders to soar above all others? We've asked these questions and more just like them. We're convinced, after more than seventy years of combined leadership, that the path to increased influence, impact, and leadership effectiveness is paved with personal growth. There's certainly more to leadership than growth, but growth is at the heart of what creates and sustains great leaders. Growth is the leader's fountain of youth.

Growing for a leader is like oxygen to a deep sea diver: without it you die. Unlike the diver, you may not physically die—but if you stop growing, your influence will erode; and over time, you can even lose the opportunity to lead at all.

Tragically, you see these losses in organizations large and small, for profit and not for profit—leaders who attain a position of leadership and fail to keep up. Or some get a promotion based on their potential, but that potential never materializes. Or perhaps you see it in

young emerging leaders who never get their shot. Their untapped potential remains untapped. What do all these situations have in common? Personal growth—or the lack of it. The failure to grow sabotages the career of more leaders than anything else.

Our capacity to grow determines our capacity to lead. It's really that simple. However, simple doesn't mean easy. Like most of life's powerful principles, the power is in the application. That's what this book is all about.

In the pages that follow, you'll go along for the ride of a lifetime with Blake, an energetic yet reluctant emerging leader. Don't get hung up on his age or lack of experience. There's some of Blake in all of us, particularly when we're faced with the challenge of growing as a leader.

Debbie Brewster plays the part of trusted mentor to Blake and shares with him four big ideas that, if applied consistently, will enable him to be a leader for life.

The idea of leading for the rest of our lives is appealing to us. We may not choose to lead in our current context or circumstances indefinitely, but name a leader you know who *wants* to become stagnant or, worse, irrelevant. We don't know any. If you decide that you want to lead well your entire life—whether in the marketplace, a nonprofit, or even in your family—you must continue to grow.

We pray that the ideas in this book will fuel your passion to grow, convince you that you can grow, show you how to grow, and empower you to grow for the rest of your life. Have fun as you GROW!

—Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller



An Unexpected Loss

“You can be a leader.” The words had ricocheted through Blake’s mind countless times since his father had said them. In part, because he had long had doubts about his ability to lead; also because they were the last words his father ever said to him. The next day, Jeff Brown died of a heart attack.

It had all been so unexpected, as heart attacks usually are, but in this case even more so. His dad had been in great physical shape. He’d eaten the right foods, gotten plenty of rest, and exercised three to four times per week. He and Blake had just returned from the ski trip of a lifetime. No one, especially Blake, had been prepared for Jeff’s death.

A month after his father’s funeral, Blake was sitting in the university library, struggling not only with his father’s death but also with the idea that he could be a leader. Had his father been blinded by his love for his only son? Was this just another example of his dad’s eternal optimism? Or perhaps—the scariest possibility of all—could it be true? Maybe Blake could be a leader. There were so

many questions Blake wanted to ask his dad. And now, he couldn't.

"You can be a leader." Blake could still see and hear his father saying these words. When he replayed them, his responses varied from "No way" to "Really?" Blake wondered how these words would play out in the years to come. Would they be a blessing or a curse? At this point, they felt like a very heavy burden.

Jeff had been a great leader. He'd been well respected, loved by most, and very successful. He'd served his organization with high levels of integrity and skill. He had also served several other nonprofit organizations in various capacities. He'd been devoted to his family and led them well. This great legacy placed a lot of pressure on Blake. Even if he could lead, he was convinced he could never lead as well as his father.

Now, Blake didn't know what to do next. He was about to graduate from college and needed a job. He was confused and scared and didn't have his father to give him advice—something he had undervalued while his father was alive. Only now did he realize how valuable that advice had been.

Hundreds of people had gathered at his father's funeral. After the service, Blake met many of Jeff's friends and coworkers. One of them was a middle-aged woman his dad had mentored for several years. Her name was Debbie Brewster; and when she introduced herself, she was fighting back tears.

Your dad made such a difference in my life, she'd said. If there's anything I can do for you, please let me know. It would be an honor to help you in any way I can.

Blake didn't know what else to do, so he gave her a call. She remembered him right away and sounded genuinely excited about meeting him for coffee the next day.

. . .

"I thought I was getting here early," Debbie said with a laugh as she approached Blake, who was already anchoring a table at the back of the cafe.

He stood to greet her. "Well, Ms. Brewster, I didn't want to keep you waiting. Dad always said we honor people when we honor their time."

"He taught me the same thing," she said as she took a seat. "But please, call me Debbie." She smiled wistfully. "This reminds me of my first meeting with your father. When I called him Mr. Brown, he stopped me and said, 'Please, call me Jeff.'"

"I really appreciate your meeting with me, Debbie," said Blake tentatively.

"How can I help?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Blake confessed.

"Okay. Let's start there." Again, Debbie smiled. "We really don't know each other," she began. "But actually, I feel like I do know you pretty well."

"Really?" Blake was surprised. "How do you know me?"

"Your father and I worked together for over ten years."

Blake wasn't connecting the dots.

"He loved you with all his heart," Debbie said.

"I know he did."

“And because he loved you so much, he talked about you all the time.”

“He did?”

“Yes. We heard about your first date, your sixteenth birthday party, your game-winning touchdown at homecoming, your college search, and we even prayed for you when you had your car accident a couple of years ago.”

“Wow!” Blake was visibly stunned. “Why would Dad share those things with you?”

“It wasn’t just me,” Debbie said.

“There are more people I don’t know who know my life history?” Blake said. He didn’t know if he felt flattered or a little bit ticked.

“Yes, there are several people in the company he shared with about you. It’s one of the reasons he was a great leader.”

“I’m confused. I thought leadership was about leadership stuff.”

“Leadership stuff?” Debbie chuckled. “I guess that’s a technical term.”

She continued, “One of the things Jeff wanted to create was a high-performance team. He knew that the best teams always do life together. That’s why we always shared about our families and other important things in our lives that were happening outside of work.”

“I didn’t know that,” Blake admitted. “Would you mind if I take a few notes?”

“Not at all,” Debbie said.

After jotting down “the best teams always do life together,” Blake said, “Since you know my life history, would you mind sharing some of yours?”

“I’d be delighted,” Debbie said. “First, “I don’t know where my career would be had I not been mentored by your dad. But more importantly, I don’t know *who* I would be. He impacted my life in profound ways.”

“How?” asked Blake.

“For one thing, he taught me virtually everything I know about leadership,” she said. “I *thought* I was a good leader early on, but in fact, I was a very poor leader, and my overconfidence nearly derailed my career. Then I met Jeff. At the time, he was the president of our company. I was a struggling front-line supervisor with a team that was dead last in performance in the entire company. After your father taught me what real leadership is all about, my team went from worst to first in performance. Over the months and years that followed, he continued to mentor me. I became the head of Leadership Development and eventually became head of Operations. The positive impact your father made on my life was huge.”

“I’ve heard that from a lot of people in the last few weeks,” Blake said. “Even now, even though he’s gone, he’s still impacting my life.”

“How so?” Debbie asked.

“I’m taking notes from you on things he taught you.” Blake looked up at Debbie. “That’s pretty cool,” he added.

“So, how can I serve you?”

“I really don’t know. The last thing Dad said to me was, ‘You can be a leader.’ I don’t know what to do with that. First, I’m not sure I believe him. Second, all I’m thinking about right now is getting a job.”

“When do you graduate?”

“I graduate in three months,” Blake said.

“Have you been interviewing with companies?”

“Yes.”

“Any leads?”

“A few.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m getting a clear picture of your uncertainty here,” she said. “What if we meet again to talk about your next steps in more detail?”

“That would be great.” Blake felt relieved. He hadn’t really known if his call to Debbie was the right thing to do. Now he sensed what a great ally she would be.

“Here’s what you can do to prepare,” said Debbie. “First, I want to understand more about your past.”

“More than my sixteenth birthday party?” Blake said with a smile.

“Yes.” Debbie continued, “Let’s talk about your strengths, your interests, and what you’ve done in your life thus far that has been fulfilling.”

Blake was taking notes. “Anything else?”

“Two more items: let’s talk about things you’re not good at, and, finally, what do you think you’d like to do for your first job—what would interest and excite you?”

“I’m not sure I can answer all those questions,” Blake said while looking at his list.

“Do the best you can. It will give us a place to start.”



Moving Forward

Three weeks elapsed before Blake's exams were over and Debbie had a free afternoon. The meeting was scheduled for the same coffee shop. Again, they both arrived early.

"Good afternoon!" Debbie said. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," Blake said. The truth was, he was still grieving over his father's death.

"Getting used to losing a loved one takes time," Debbie said gently. "Did you have time to think through the things we discussed at the end of our first meeting?"

"I did. Just as I feared, I don't know the answers to all the questions."

"That's okay. I rarely know all the answers to my own questions," Debbie said with a grin. "And that really doesn't diminish the power of the question. Often the search for the answer is just as valuable as the answer itself. Let's see what you've come up with so far."

They began to discuss Blake's strengths and passions. Blake was very talented, so this was a fascinating conversation.

“It’s easy to see Jeff’s influence on your life,” she said. “After just twenty minutes, we’ve identified the following about you: You’re comfortable meeting people. You enjoy working with children—you were a camp counselor during your high school years. You’re a good student—a high GPA and other test scores helped you get into a prestigious university. You majored in business administration with a minor in marketing. And you’re athletically inclined—you played several sports growing up and are still an avid skier.”

Blake responded, “What does it all mean?”

“I’m not a career counselor,” Debbie began, “but to me, it looks like you can do a lot of different things.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. What if I make a bad choice?”

“You will.”

“Excuse me?” This comment really got Blake’s attention.

“Sure. We all make mistakes, and we do our best to learn from them. That’s one of the things leaders do extremely well.”

That was the first time the “L” word had been used specifically in their conversation.

“Now that you mention leadership, Debbie, I think that’s what’s really got me spooked.”

“What do you mean?”

“My dad and I talked about my career and my future just before he died. It was actually our last conversation.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said that I could be a leader.”

“And?” Debbie probed.

“I told him I didn’t think so.”

“Why not?”

Anytime you influence the thinking, beliefs, or development of another person, you’re engaging in leadership.

“A lot of reasons, I guess. It seems like it would be hard to be a good leader. I’m only twenty-two years old; I don’t know how to lead. I’m not even sure what it really means to be a leader, and—” Blake paused.

“Blake, I think you have a narrow idea about leadership. But you’re not the only one. I ask people all the time if they are a leader, and hardly anyone says yes. I usually follow up that question up with ‘Tell me: who has had the greatest impact on your life?’ Hardly anyone ever mentions a manager or supervisor they had at work. Just like you, they talk about their father, their mother, their grandparent, a friend, or a teacher. You see, we all have the opportunity to lead in some area of our lives.”

“Even me? How I am I leader?” Blake asked.

“Anytime you influence the thinking, beliefs, or development of another person, you’re engaging in leadership.”

“So you mean I don’t have to have an impressive title to be a leader?”

“Exactly. Unless you’ve been living in a cave, I bet you’ve been influencing friends and classmates for a long time.”

“I get what you’re saying,” said Blake, “but Dad was such a great leader.” He swallowed hard. “He said he would teach me—and now he’s gone.” His eyes grew moist.

“I’m so sorry, Blake,” Debbie said softly. “Would you like for us to reschedule this meeting?”

“No, thanks, I just need a moment.”

“Let’s take a break and come back in fifteen minutes. I need another cup of tea anyway.”

“Thanks.”

Blake walked outside and stared at the sky. It was a beautiful day. The sky was as blue as he’d ever seen, and the clouds were whiter than any he could ever remember. As the breeze blew across his face, he wiped his eyes and felt a spirit of optimism. It was as if he knew in his heart that things really were going to be okay. In that moment, he wasn’t yet convinced that he could be a leader, but he was convinced he could try. He went back inside and found Debbie reviewing her notes.

She looked up. “Sure you’re okay with continuing this conversation today?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m okay. But the last few weeks have been really hard.”

“I know the feeling,” Debbie said. “My mom died when I was about your age.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Blake said in a tone of surprise.

Debbie nodded. “Although it was many years ago, it’s a part of my story that is still painful. But I’m stronger today. So, I do understand some of what you’re feeling. That’s one reason I’d love to help you if I can. I made some mistakes—in part because of my mother’s death. Perhaps I can help you avoid some of those same mistakes.”

“What kind of mistakes?” Blake asked eagerly.

“I’ll tell you about that later. Right now our first challenge is to help you find a job.”

“That would be great. What are you thinking?” Blake had his pen in hand.

“I have a few ideas for you to consider. I think the company you work for matters. Based on the world we live in, I’m not assuming you’ll be there your entire career, but a good start would be nice.”

“What would a good start look like to you?” Blake asked.

“I’m thinking about a company that shares your core values. In my experience, when a person’s core values are not aligned with a company’s values, it’s rarely a great situation—short term or long term.

“I’m also thinking about a company that has a reputation for investing in their people. These companies are harder to find today, but they’re still out there.

“Finally, I believe you want a company that could provide a long-term future—just in case you want to stay.”

“Wouldn’t that be true at any company? I mean, if I wanted to stay and make a career, wouldn’t that be an option anywhere I might work?”

“Not really. Some companies have a culture of high turnover. That’s probably not where you want to start your career.”

“You didn’t mention leadership development.” Blake added.

“You’re right. I didn’t for two reasons. First, I haven’t heard you say you want to be an organizational leader. I heard you say that your dad believed you could lead. There’s a big difference. If you don’t feel like you want to be a leader, you shouldn’t pursue a leadership position. You ought to be an individual contributor. That’s one of the lessons I referenced earlier. When I was your age, my parents wanted me to be a teacher. They were both teachers—and teaching is certainly a noble profession. But it was not me. However, after Mom died, I decided that to honor her, I should be a teacher. Unfortunately, there were some small children that suffered through my poor career choice. Thankfully, I came to my senses after just one year in the classroom.

“You’ve got to pursue your dream, not someone else’s dream for you. There are countless ways you can and will honor your dad. However, making a poor career choice is not one of them. If, in your heart, you can’t honestly say that you want to serve people, you shouldn’t pursue leadership.”

“Wait a minute. You’re going to have to go back to the idea of ‘serving people’ as a motivator for leadership.”

“That’s actually the most important thing your father taught me in the decade we worked together: ‘Great leaders SERVE.’ And it took him a long time to help me fully

understand what that means and what it looks like on a daily basis, so I don't expect it to make sense the first time you hear it. But make no mistake. If you don't want to serve, you cannot be a great leader. Robert Greenleaf, the founder of the modern servant leadership movement, said it well: 'You have to be a servant first and a leader second.'"

Blake was taking notes. "You said there were two reasons you didn't mention leadership development. What's the second one?"

"Having a company that invests in leadership development is really good, but that alone won't determine your success. If you can find a company that meets all your criteria *and* invests in leadership development, that would be a bonus, but it is not essential for your success as a leader."

"What is essential?"

"You've got to be willing to GROW."

"Is that it?" Blake gave Debbie a look of disbelief.

"Yes, that's it. However, there are some specific things you can do to accelerate and sustain your growth as a leader."

"And what are those 'specific things'?" Again, Blake's pen was poised.

"We can explore that together in the months to come. For now, let's focus on getting you a job." She smiled.

They brainstormed a list of companies that might be good candidates for Blake. Debbie gave Blake a list of people she knew who might be able to help him. He left

with the names of several companies and people he hadn't previously contacted.

His action items were to make the contacts, try to get interviews, and be ready to share his progress at their next meeting.

"Thanks for the time!" Blake finally felt like he was making progress.