1. Topic

Nelson Mandela famously said: “There is no passion to be found playing small – in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.” And, Yoda, the Grand Master of the Jedi order, in a Star Wars movie, wisely observes, “Do, or do not. There is no try...Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter.” Yoda invites his young student, Luke Skywalker, to believe in a greater power and to tap into the force in the universe that sustains his human energy and ability to live a life full of high purpose. Luke retorts, “You want the impossible,” moments before Yoda commits to making one particular ‘impossibility’ possible.

As a leader, you are often asked to do that which seems impossible. You are constantly navigating the fertile verge of the unknown and of the unknowable, as you seek to improve the lives of those you serve and become a better leader. We all know that leadership is not a solitary journey and that it is inherently an expedition of discovery. So, what of your journey of discovery? Are you living your life’s purpose? If this were the last day of your life, would you be doing what you are doing now? If the answer to the last question is in the affirmative, or a strong ‘yes,’ congratulations are in order. If, on the other hand, you are not whom you wish to be and passion is not lighting your way, it is time to set your sets higher or to explore new vistas. In the words of one professor, Randy Pausch, “it is the things we do not do that we regret.”

As you determine your life’s purpose, call upon the passion that ignites your dreams. The author, J.K. Rowling, offers an excellent piece of advice:

“We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power that we need inside ourselves already; we have the power to imagine better.” This transformative power begins with a belief in your own power, your imagination, intellect, and in the human potential of those around you. The choices that you make on a daily basis, from small acts of kindness, to being resilient in the face of setbacks, determines the legacy you will leave. You make your life from what you give to others.

In a world filled with seemingly insurmountable challenges, whether terrorism threats, climate change, hatred against identifiable groups, despots, nuclear and biological weapons proliferation, or, an economy that is in a state of continuous disruption, leaders are being called upon to reinvent the world. As a manager in a public sector, private sector or non-profit setting, how you choose to live your life, and to exercise your gifts and talents, determines not only your own success but that of Canada. Your contribution may well impact global governance and international priorities, depending upon the role that you play and your sphere of influence.

In the face of adversity, your imagination is needed to invent, to innovate and to envision that which is not yet possible but can become so, with your related efforts. There is no room for a...
bystander mentality. As the actor, Denzel Washington, notes: “Thomas Edison conducted 1,000 failed experiments, and, the 1,001st was the lightbulb.” His point is that no one remembers the failures but they do remember Edison’s breakthrough. He underlines the importance of being prepared to “fall forward,” being prepared to take risks and embracing the inevitable breakdowns that arise so that each ‘failure’ takes you one step closer to achieving success. Leaders, by definition, challenge the way that things are supposed to be, confronting the orthodoxy of today in order to create a new way of doing business for tomorrow. Reflect upon the large, inspiring, and audacious goals that you have set for yourself. Have you defined your leadership purpose, or are you going through the motions, as others dictate your life for you? How will you live with intentionality in order to attain your dreams?

2. Assignment

We all arrive in this world with many gifts and talents. The inner light that you carry from infancy to adulthood is apparent to those who have the occasion to work beside you. What you achieve inside, as a leader, affects what you are able to transform in your external orbit.

If your life speaks for you, what does it say about you? Rosa Parks, a brave African American woman, living in 1955’s Montgomery, Alabama, sat at the front of a bus reserved for whites only – an act of courage in a racist society. Parker Palmer relates that, as a seamstress in her forties, Rosa had studied theories of non-violence and civil disobedience, as she was also the secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. No longer prepared to live in a way that contradicted her own values, she took an enormous risk and fought for her rights and for those who had experienced institutionalized racism in the Southern USA. When the police boarded the bus, and threatened to throw her in jail, she did not back down. Finding your true self, and directing your life’s journey, may not be as dramatic a story as the one that Rosa Parks found herself living out but yours can be equally compelling and meaningful. As a leader, you not only transform your world, but you are also transformed by your experiences.

Do not be afraid to pursue your dreams. We all live with fears. Leaders learn to move forward in spite of their fears, as they touch other people’s lives to bring about much needed change. When you watch an infant take their first steps and fall, you don’t give up at their first attempts. You patiently nurture their experimentation, urging them on with enthusiasm and with smiles and a helping hand. Robert Fulghum once wisely said, in a moving essay on the life lessons he had learned from kindergarten, “When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.” As a leader, you should be asking whether you are fostering world-class human purpose and standards in the work you are doing. Innovation in a human context is equally about greater human fulfillment or purpose, not just about greater economic wealth. How you support your team members and colleagues, as you deal with complexity and obstacles, speaks volumes about who you are as a leader. Do the people you
lead want to hold hands with you and accompany you into an uncertain world together, as you create the future?

Canada’s own **history of leadership and of innovation**, forged in the World War I and II periods of great crisis, has served as a living nutrient medium for excellence, for diversity and social inclusion, and it requires strengthening. Canada’s **experiments in living**, and its promotion of **an open society**, require leaders who keep an open mind, and, where the best discoveries often spring from a commitment to an ideal. As Hubert Dreyfus observes, “The risks to our future will not come from the advent of super-intelligent computers and robots, but from sub-intelligent human beings” who lose touch with their heart and their creativity.

Ask yourself the following questions:

a) Do you encourage your employees to **experiment** and welcome their ideas? Or, do you exhort them to be creative and then derail their ideas?

b) Do you invite your team members to look at **global** best practices and to learn from them?

c) Would you characterize your employees as being **mobile investors** and entrepreneurs who can choose to invest their human capital where they are highly engaged, or, as a means to advancing your objectives?

d) Are you investing in and developing your employees?

e) Have you checked you own assumptions about how people work or their aspirations? Have you built trust by asking people about the changes they wish to see going forward?

f) Are you routinely examining ways in which you can **learn from the past, adapt to the present, and anticipate the future**?

g) What greater achievements are you making possible, as you lead others?

h) What social and professional **networks** are you harnessing to employ the human potential and knowledge that is found in these clusters? Using them as bridges to achieve your objectives?

i) How are you putting people first in your work?

j) Are you **playing fewer notes on life’s piano** that you are capable of doing? How might you enrich your life and that of others by augmenting or altering your **leadership purpose**?

k) What are you insatiably curious about that you have not yet done?

l) What passion or intention have you declared powerfully? What **commitments** are you making?

3. **Video Descriptions and instructions**

As you view the two videos noted below, ask yourself whether you see the benefits to be derived from falling short of your objectives and then taking those lessons forward to invent a successful outcome. Explore the crucial importance of using **your imagination** and creativity as a pre-condition for success. Examine the strengths to be found in diverse people and ideas, as a renewable force of energy and invention.

You will start with J.K. Rowling’s 2008 Commencement Speech to Harvard graduates, entitled, “The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and, the Importance of Imagination.” It is nearly 21 minutes in
The video can be accessed via this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHGqp8lz36c

The second video you are being asked to view features an excerpt from the Star Wars movie, entitled, “The Empire Strikes Back.” In it, we see Yoda, a wise sage and master coach, offering advice to his young charge, Luke Skywalker. Yoda challenges Luke to move outside of his comfort zone and to live at the edge of his very capabilities, as he pushes him to grow as a leader. The video is almost 5 minutes long and can be located at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YkbgvRMpW0&t=209s

4. Follow-Up Activities and Application

As you reflect upon these two videos, ask yourself:

a) Like Luke Skywalker, what do I have to **unlearn** so that I can create new breakthroughs and discard old ways of doing business?

b) Am I demonstrating faith in the **human potential** of those around me? Am I nurturing talent and leaving a legacy of inspired leaders?

c) Does my **imagination** allow me to be empathetic towards **diverse** people and to embrace the unique perspectives and ideas they have to offer the organization?

d) In **an economy of ideas**, what new ideas have I brought forward lately? Or, have I become yesterday's innovator, a **guardian of the status quo**, afraid to fail?

e) Have my core competencies become my core rigidities?

f) What public interest or **greater mission** am I advancing in the work that I perform? How does the work that I lead affect the well-being of Canadians?

g) Am I casting the shadow of the future forward as I explore **new frontiers** in my work?

h) What new futures and new possibilities am I disclosing?

i) What **sense-making** am I engaged in with my team members to assist them in tackling change and uncertainty? Where there is less likely to be a management map outlining territory previously travelled and only a general sense of directions to be taken?

j) Am I an **adaptive leader** who is unafraid to lead my team into new worlds? Invites people to pursue many paths to greatness? Or, do I speak the language of scarcity and of pessimism?

k) Am I promoting **human growth**?

In the end, successful innovations and ideas are derived from a remarkable variety of people and ideas upon which we build the future. Creating a society in Canada that is fit for human beings depends on systems and institutions that respect and nurture differences, while seeking common ground in unifying values and dreams.

What **value creation** are you engaged in as a leader in Canada?
How are you shaping human progress?
What is your leadership purpose?
For the sake of what are you leading?
Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” I wish you good luck as you shape your life’s purpose and Canada’s future!

5. Expert Knowledge

Dawn Nicholson-O’Brien is the President and CEO of Celtic Oracle, an executive services consulting firm. A former executive in the Government of Canada, Dawn served in executive level roles during three and a half decades. She also served as the Vice President of the Institute on Governance, has developed and delivered advanced leadership programs for executives, and, she is the recipient of numerous leadership awards. Dawn is a sought after speaker and author (see www.celticoracle.ca)

6. Key Words

Key words include: leadership purpose; playing small; fertile verge of the unknown; human potential; expedition of discovery; legacy; reinvent the world; bystander mentality; experimentation; taking informed risks and falling forward; true self; imagination; fears; benefits of failure; sense-making; human growth; open society; economy of ideas; new frontiers.

7. Additional Resources and Readings

- Robert Fulghum, author of *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, http://www.robertleefulghum.com/

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