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CHAPTER ONE

Leaders We Love to Follow

ONE OF THE FIRST GROUPS who invited me (Marcus) to teach on Rare Leadership didn't seem to realize what they had signed up for. As I waited for my opportunity to explain the habits of mature leaders to them, the owner of the company laid out a vision for his team. He opened with the unforgettable line: "We want to be ----- pirates!" That got my attention. I wondered where he was going with this. He continued, "We want our competitors to see our name on the bid sheet and say, 'Oh no, it's them! Those cutthroats will do whatever it takes to get this bid.'" He then wrapped up his introduction and said, "Now, here's Marcus to teach us about rare leadership."

I was a bit stunned. Someone clearly hadn't told him that rare leadership was about relational and emotional maturity. He didn't seem to see the difference between mature leadership and "do-whatever-it-takes" business ethics.

To this man's credit, he quickly got on board. Partway through our opening presentation, he realized that he wasn't

very mature in the way he ran his company—or his family. At one point, after seeing a slide outlining the difference between mature people who live with their relational brain circuits on and immature people who live with them off, he blurted out, “I don’t think I’ve ever had my relational circuits on.” The rest of the people in the room all looked at me as if to say, “He’s not lying.”

After that moment, the questions started coming with great earnestness and, by the end of the meeting, his team signed up for a year of coaching on Rare Leadership with our lead trainer. The next year I was invited back to address the company’s national management team. This time, instead of his “cutthroat” speech, the owner said, “We want to be a company that handles ourselves like adults. We want everyone we interact with to say, ‘We love working with this company because we love the way they go about their business.’ Now here’s Marcus to teach us how to be mature leaders.” I couldn’t help but smile. He had come a long way.

Later that year, the CEO of this company told me he had started teaching the RARE model whenever he was asked to speak at leadership events. “Not only has it changed our culture,” he told me, “it has improved our bottom line.”

WE NEED MORE MATURE LEADERS

The lack of maturity in most leadership settings is becoming increasingly obvious. Psychologist and leadership expert Richard Davis wrote an article for the *Harvard Business Review* with

the simple title, “We Need More Mature Leaders.”¹ In this article he launches an attack on “sandbox leaders”—people who don’t play well together. The childish behavior and narcissistic outlooks of these immature leaders place personal pride above the good of their organization. In summary, Davis writes:

The timing could not be worse. The nation’s current problems, as vast and overwhelming as they are, appear secondary to the whims of spoiled children, unwilling to play well together. At a time when we need solid, grounded leadership more than ever, we seem to be in short supply of adults who act like, well . . . like adults.²

I often show this quote on a slide when I teach at leadership events, and generally see heads nodding in agreement all across the room. Most assume the critique was ripped out of the current headlines and describes the mess we are in today. But I like to draw their attention to the fact that the article was written in 2011. That was quite a few years ago. It is a reminder that the level of maturity in this culture is not moving in the right direction. On the contrary, we are in the midst of a maturity crisis—not only in leadership but at all levels of society. If you have any doubt, just browse social media for a few minutes.

The purpose of this book is not to condemn or criticize anyone specifically. Rather, it is to call all of us to “up our

game” when it comes to handling life with maturity. Mature leaders excel at building healthy cultures, solving problems relationally, and keeping relationships bigger than problems.

“SUPER CHICKENS”: MATURITY VS. RESULTS

Sandbox leadership is a growing problem around the world. Most organizations are so results-driven, they don't put enough emphasis on the maturity of the people they hire and promote. Most leaders get where they are because they are good at solving problems and getting results. These attributes, however, have nothing to do with character or relational competence. The problem with hiring or promoting people strictly on the basis of results is that we often place selfish and immature individuals into important positions. Any short-term results come at the price of a toxic work culture. Our long-term results will not be what we hoped.

In a widely viewed TED talk, Margaret Heffernan argues that there is a serious flaw with only looking at results when evaluating performance. In her presentation, she tells about a researcher at Purdue University who conducted a simple experiment to measure egg production in chickens. The goal was improved production. They started with one group of chickens and counted how many eggs each one produced. Then they took the “top producers” (the ones who got the best results) and put them into a special group. They did this for six generations, hoping to breed a group of “super chickens” who would lay more eggs than “normal chickens.” The results

of the experiment were a bit shocking. Over six generations, the normal chickens saw their egg-production per chicken increase dramatically. When they measured results among the “super chickens,” they found that only three of them were still alive! This was certainly not the conclusion they were expecting! It turned out that these were not super chickens at all but “predator chickens.” They got better results than the rest because they pecked at the other chickens and kept their production low. When they were trapped in a group together, they literally pecked each other to death.³

This story must have something to do with life in corporate America, because Ms. Heffernan’s TED talk has been watched by millions. For our purposes, it demonstrates the danger of emphasizing results over maturity in leadership. When results and maturity meet, you get the best of both worlds. The danger grows when results are elevated to the point that maturity no longer matters.

WHAT IS MATURITY?

Maturity is a collection of skills and habits we develop over time. Just like it takes hard work and repetition to build muscle, so it takes hard work and repetition to build maturity. And just as stronger muscles give you more capacity to handle weight, so greater maturity gives you more capacity to handle the hardships of life. From this perspective, maturity can be defined as enduring hardship well. The key word in that sentence is “well.” We all suffer. We all endure hardship. What

Mature people establish routines in their life that help them keep their joy levels high.

separates maturity from immaturity is the ability to suffer well. We will take a deeper dive into this idea in chapter 7, but here are a few thoughts to get us started.

Maturity requires joy. One of the keys to enduring hardship well is learning how to live life on the high-powered fuel of joy. Joy can be thought of as the air in the ball that lets it bounce. When you wake up feeling great and full of anticipation for the day ahead, you have lots of air in your ball. That joy makes it much easier to bounce back from the hard things that happen throughout the day. At the end of the evening we need a routine to help us replenish that joy so our tank is full for the next day. One of the characteristics of mature people is that they establish routines in their life that help them keep their joy levels high, so that they have the energy and emotional capacity to deal with the hard things that inevitably come their way.

So what do we mean by joy? It is surprising to many people to learn that from our brain's perspective, joy is always relational. Part of the joy of taking a walk and enjoying the fall colors or the golden hour of sunset is that it is a relational experience for us. It makes us feel connected to memories in the past of sharing such moments with people we loved. It makes us think of people with whom we would like to

share the experience. Even the joy of finishing a project successfully is basically relational. We anticipate getting a “job well done” and a smile from someone who will be pleased with us and happy to see us.

The highest joy cultures in the world are the most relational. Take Denmark, for example. In study after study it ranks as one of the happiest cultures on earth.⁴ But what’s the secret? What do they do differently? In a nutshell, the Danish culture is anchored in a great rhythm of work, rest, and relationship. People often meet for coffee or beer after work, take time for strolls through the park, and have friends over for dinner in the evening. It is common for relational experiences like these to happen at some point every day. In addition, most Sundays are highlighted by a meal shared by extended family in which multiple generations of aunts, uncles, and cousins gather for food and fun. Having a life anchored in so much relational connection and joy creates a sense that you never go through anything alone. Relational joy provides security as well as energy for dealing with the ups and downs of life.

In stark contrast, American culture is highly individual. Families don’t tend to stay together. We often hop from job to job and form very surface-level relationships. Without a relational anchor, we find it hard to replenish our joy and life becomes a grind. In the business world, leaders who learn how to build strong relational community in which people like working together and enjoy being around each other will have a much more engaged workforce.

Maturity requires a stable core identity. From a brain science perspective, maturity develops as we grow a relational sense of self that stays the same no matter what emotions we have to face. If I turn into a different person with every emotion I feel, I am functioning like an infant rather than an adult.⁵

Let's consider the case of Bob. Bob was a fun-loving person who was great at casting vision and getting people to join his cause. He was a gifted motivator, was driven by his vision, and developed a close circle of loyal friends. Bob loved to be the hero but didn't know how to handle being the problem. Over time, his friends began to notice that when Bob felt any shame or criticism, he often snapped at them and seemed to become a totally different person. Whenever something went wrong, Bob was known to stop the team meeting until someone took ownership for the failure. Bob himself never took ownership. One of his chief supporters gradually became Bob's whipping boy. Whenever something went wrong, this man often volunteered to take the blame, just to keep the meeting going. As long as Bob felt like you were on his side, he loved you like a brother. But if he sensed any opposition from you, he interpreted it as disloyalty, and Bob could be very harsh with disloyalty. Everyone liked Bob, the fun-loving visionary, but they were scared of Bob, the loyalty enforcer. They all learned to avoid subjects that brought out the enforcer. No one wanted to lift the lid on Pandora's box and unleash the chaos. It was safer just to keep Bob happy.

Few people understood that Bob had a maturity problem. Even fewer people recognized that Bob lacked skills related to handling shame. When Bob left and a new leader took his place, people suddenly felt like they could breathe more deeply. The entire atmosphere of the workplace changed. Only after they experienced the change did most people realize how toxic the environment had become.

When Bob felt shame, he flipped from friend mode into enemy mode. In an instant, he went from being someone you genuinely liked to someone scary. Bob could remain relational and act like himself a lot of the time, but when shame got triggered, it exposed a hole in his maturity. He stopped being relational and lost the ability to act like himself. Like an infant, he turned into a completely different person when he felt shame.

An inability to handle shame leads the Bobs of this world to instinctively justify themselves whenever a problem arises. They are experts at making sure that pain and blame get deflected to someone else. Instead of building the habits of mature leadership, they have built the habits of immature, sandbox leadership.

FOUR CORE HABITS OF MATURITY

Most of us can be relational and act like ourselves when life is easy. Maturity gets tested when life is hard. We have defined maturity as enduring hardship well. There is an inherent logic to this definition, especially when you think about the stages

When Bob felt shame, he went from being someone you genuinely liked to someone scary.

of maturity development. You expect a child to handle hardship better than a baby. You expect a teen to handle suffering better than a child, and an adult to handle more stress than a teen. However, there is a difference between handling hardship and handling it well.

The difference lies in a person's ability to remain relational, act like themselves, and return to joy in spite of the hardship. These are the four core habits of mature leaders. We will take a quick look at them now, explain the brain science behind them in the next chapter, and spend the rest of the book unpacking why these are so important and how to grow them.

The four habits of mature leaders can be remembered as a simple equation, summed up in the word RARE— $R+A+R=E$.

Remain relational

plus

Act like yourself

plus

Return to joy

equals

Endure hardship well

Since mature leaders are often hard to find, the acrostic RARE seems appropriate.

Rare leaders often don't realize they have these four habits. They aren't simply choosing to do these things every time a problem arises. These habits show up automatically as part of their character. That is our goal. We want to practice skills until they become habits that show up without our having to think about them.

WHAT ARE THE MARKS OF AN EFFECTIVE LEADER?

Effective leaders are set apart by the maturity that shows up wherever they go. Their maturity serves as a catalyst for everything they do. It helps them focus on the right issues and make sure they are giving their conscious attention to the right things. It anchors their lives in habits that make them a welcome addition to any team. Their maturity also helps them excel at collaborative work. Unlike sandbox leaders who don't play well with others, one of the qualities that make mature leaders so effective is their high capacity for relational engagement. Maturity will always produce these three marks of effective leadership.

- 1. Focus.** Effective leaders are good at focusing on tasks and decision-making that keep their teams and organizations moving forward. Focus is related to what gets our conscious attention (as opposed to what shows up automatically because it is part of our character and skill set). Focus is crucial to vision casting, problem solving, and getting work done. For some of us, that is all there is to

leadership, but really, focus is just the tip of the iceberg of all that goes into being an effective leader.

- 2. Habits.** Effective leaders possess skills at deeper level than the ability to focus. These skills are related to our character, emotional capacity, relational competence, and all of the “soft skills” that are developed in a much deeper part of the brain than mere focus. Habits we have developed over time show up automatically wherever we go because they are formed in a part of the brain where activity can be thought of as “supraconscious.” It is supraconscious as opposed to subconscious because it is happening in a part of the brain that processes activity faster than we can put things into words. We call this part of the brain the fast track.

Because these habits are formed in the part of our brain that operates faster than the speed of thought, they don't show up because we focus on them and choose to use them. They show up because we have taken the time to develop these skills so that they happen automatically. We see this in sports, music, and the arts. Most of what an athlete, musician, or artist does happens automatically. Their focus is not on the skills and habits they have already spent years developing. Their focus is on the mood, the creativity, and the situation at hand. If they have to stop and think about their technique or something else that is basic to the execution of their task, they are more likely to make mistakes than if they trust what they have learned and stay

in the flow of the moment. In the same way that I don't stop to think about how to type as I (Marcus) write these words or I lose track of the flow of my words, effective leaders have habits and skills that have been developed in the supracconscious, superfast part of the brain. Any leader can practice focused attention. What separates mature leaders from sandbox leaders are the skill and habits they have developed that allow their character and relational skill to show up automatically.

3. Collaboration. The third mark of an effective leader relates to the ability to read the people around them and collaborate well. The ability to read situations correctly, calculate the timing and coordination of the preferred responses, and then direct the attention and energy of the people around the leader to work cooperatively affects a variety of leadership problems that need to be solved:

- What will our customers need?
- How will our team respond?
- What value will our team provide effectively?
- What will “synchronize” the team?
- How will we reach our objectives?
- What activities are sustainable for our team and our customers?

Most of this book will focus on the supracconscious skills and habits of mature leaders, but we wanted you to have a

sense of how this all fits together. For those who like memory devices, you can remember these three essential elements of effective leadership as CASHCoW.

- Focus is CA—Conscious Attention
- Habits is SH—Supraconscious Habits
- Collaboration is CW—Collaborative Work

LIFTING THE LID

There is a difference between personal success and leadership effectiveness. I may succeed personally at tasks I undertake like finishing a project, preparing a report, or making a sale, but such successes are not the same as leading a team successfully. Many people who are good at getting work done individually lack the skills and habits to lead well. The lid on the effectiveness of most leaders is not a lack of task-related skills. It is also deeper than possessing “people skills.” The real lid on leadership effectiveness is related to maturity skills. Put simply, immaturity sabotages leadership effectiveness; maturity grows it. Thus, if you want to become the sort of leader others love to follow, you need to grow your personal maturity skills. That is why we wrote this book. We want to help you begin building the four RARE habits that characterize mature leaders. In the process you will also learn how to increase trust and engagement in the people you lead.

One small business owner in the Portland area learned the four RARE habits and started teaching them to his team. He

hung banners in his office and had signs placed on each desk that read, “Remain relational. Act like yourself. Return to joy. Endure hardship well.” He put the signs next to the phones so that as his team members handled difficult calls and problematic emails, they had a constant reminder in front of them of how adults handle hardship. Within a month or two, these practices were starting to become habits. On one occasion when the manager was in his office complaining about a situation and struggling with his emotions, one of the team members—a person who had been notorious for their lack of grace—called out, “It sounds like someone needs to return to joy!” The manager laughed to himself and smiled broadly as he realized he was beginning to succeed in building a healthy culture with a common language to describe their values.⁵ His people were even starting to remind him of how it was like them to act. By the team learning to handle hardship well, the maturity level in the office was growing.

I (Marcus) have some good friends who demonstrated rare leadership in the way they navigated the hardships caused by the pandemic in 2020. This husband-and-wife team run a business that employs nearly fifty people in a factory that refurbishes iron for a major railroad company. One of their top priorities was making sure that they kept running on the fuel of relational joy. They did this first by closely guarding time together in their marriage. They made sure they had an evening routine for winding down and relaxing together and that they put things on the calendar they could anticipate with

excitement like date nights and short trips. They also dealt with their management team and employees in a way that collaboratively created solutions to the new problems they faced. They found ways to help their workers social distance and rotate shifts. They used the tax codes and government initiatives to maximum benefit, and actually raised salaries for their workers. Through it all, they acted like themselves. There were no meltdowns or shouting matches. They didn't avoid the problems but tackled them head-on. One of the reasons they were able to do this was that in prior years they had dismissed managers and workers whose immaturity had created a toxic environment, intentionally promoting those with greater maturity. As a result, they had a mature team in place when the crisis hit who were able to manage the hardship while remaining relational and acting like themselves.

The RARE habits of mature leaders demonstrated by these small business owners are anchored in an understanding of how the brain works. In the next chapter we will introduce a simple model of brain function that will help you understand how these habits work and why they are so important.

MATURITY WORKOUT: QUIETING

At the end of each chapter we will give you a recommended exercise you can start doing in order to begin growing your emotional capacity and thus your ability to handle hardship well. The first skill is quieting. In the book *Building Bounce*, which I (Marcus) wrote along with art therapist and child development expert Stefanie Hinman,⁶ we recommend four BEST practices for quieting.

B—Breathing. Deep breathing is a good way to help your nervous system calm down from upset emotion. The Navy SEALs teach breathing in a box—inhale for a four-count, hold your breath for a four-count, exhale for a four-count, and hold for another four-count. You repeat this until you feel a bit more under control. In working with children, Stefanie often encourages them to “smell the soup” (inhale deeply), then blow on the soup (exhale fully). This is just another way of working on breathing. Take one to two minutes to breath in a box or smell and blow the soup, and see if you don’t feel a little calmer.

E—Exaggerating. It rarely does any good to simply tell yourself (or someone else) to just calm down. It helps to exaggerate the emotion before quieting.

When you are angry, you might try (privately!) making a big angry face and clenching your fists, while blowing air out of your nose to make your nostrils flare. In this way you are exaggerating some of the physical elements of the anger you feel. After this, practice deep breathing and rubbing the tension out of your arms. You can do this three or four times if necessary. It can help you quiet yourself. You can do similar exercises with other emotions.

S—Soothing. Soothing can relate to your environment or your body. Building a fire in the fireplace, taking a hot shower or bath, sitting with heavy wool blankets, and rubbing your arms are just a few ways that people often take a few minutes or more to calm and quiet.

T—Tensing. Tensing and releasing muscle groups is another good quieting skill. You can do this on airplanes, in meetings, or at your desk. You simply focus on one set of muscles (arms, legs, shoulders) and tighten them for a count of five, then let the muscles relax. Exhaling deeply also helps.

Using these BEST practices when you feel tension rising can help you build the skills to quiet more quickly from upset emotions which is an important element of returning to joy.

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