



# Crucibles of Leadership How to Learn from Experience to Become a Great Leader

By Robert J. Thomas

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Institute for  
High Performance  
Business

February 2008

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# What can you learn about leadership development from the Hells Angels motorcycle club? Or from the Mormon Church? Lessons as valuable as those you can learn from General Electric, Toyota and Boeing.

Leaders of all these organizations have found that the ability to learn from experience distinguishes great leaders from average ones. Moreover, the ability to learn from experience is critical to building a pipeline of capable leaders. The most fertile of these experiences are crucibles—times of trial and failure as often as success. Crucibles are transformative experiences that force aspiring leaders to examine who they are, what matters to them and what they can learn from success and failure. They teach lessons about leading and about learning.

Importantly, crucibles can be found more often in personal experience—in family life, wartime trauma, athletic competition or personal loss—than they can on the job. Even the best leadership workshop or seminar pales in comparison to the impact of experience as a teacher. More important, crucibles can be mined

for insight to make leaders more effective and improve the performance of the organizations they lead – if leaders are equipped to learn from experience.

That is the essence of a new book by Robert J. Thomas, executive director of the Accenture Institute for High Performance Business. Called **Crucibles of Leadership: How to Learn from Experience to Become a Great Leader**, it will be published in March 2008 by the Harvard Business School Press. The book showcases an original approach to leader development that leverages crucible experiences. It also establishes an important new role for senior management in creating a depth of leadership talent—an essential characteristic of high-performance organizations, according to Accenture's High Performance Business research.

## Why this book is important

There's not a leader alive who doesn't want to be more effective. Nor is there a CEO alive who doesn't worry about growing more leaders. Thus, **Crucibles of Leadership** is an excellent tool for building relationships with the C-suite. Its vivid stories from leaders in global corporations—as well as stories about the Hells Angels motorcycle run and the Mormon missionary experience—can form the basis for revealing personal conversations with C-suite executives.

But the book is much more than stories. What sets apart the leaders in this book is their approach to learning. Rather than wait for the right moment to arrive, they discover and exploit learning opportunities. Rather than partition their lives into periods of action and reflection, they do both—often on a daily basis and sometimes in the same moment.

## Questions to ask the C-suite

These are good questions to start a conversation with senior executives about the organization's preparedness to cultivate future generations of leaders. The first four questions follow the trail of reasoning in the book.

- Tell me about a time when you learned something really important about being a leader. Did it occur on or off the job? (Encourage the person to recount the experience in detail.)
- What did you learn?
- How did you learn it? (For example, who or what resources helped you see the lesson embedded in the experience?)

- If that's how you learned and those were the resources you needed to make the lessons stick, how much of that are you providing the people in your organization?

If you prefer to start the conversation more generally, these questions would apply:

- Are you concerned about the next generation of leaders—as well as the ones 15 to 20 years from now?
- Are you and your organization doing enough to choose the right people to be candidates for the next generation of leaders?
- Are you selecting candidates based on today's success criteria or tomorrow's?

- If you believe that experience is the best teacher of leadership, what are you and your organization doing to help people at all ages and levels make the most of their experiences?
- How much do you know about the generation of leaders after the next one? Who are they? What do they value? Have you done enough to motivate them to step up and take the mantle?

Like accomplished performers in sports or the performing arts, outstanding leaders *practice* as strenuously as they perform. And because they often find themselves onstage much of the time, they learn how to practice while they perform—not simply to learn by doing but to learn *while* doing. Thomas brings these points to life with stirring examples of how learning style has shaped the performance of experts as diverse as musicians Eric Clapton and Paul Simon, athletes Bill Russell and Tiger Woods, and business executives Sir Richard Branson, Virgin founder and chairman and Wall Street pioneer Muriel Siebert

The book makes visible the process of becoming alert to the warning signs of an impending crucible so that leaders can identify the skills necessary to cope, respond and learn. In fact, one of the most important findings of the research is that the ability to mine crucible experiences for insight can be learned. Intensive, long-term conscious practice can trump native talent because practice establishes a state of continuous preparedness.

To help leaders transform their crucible experiences into lessons that will make them more effective, Thomas developed what he calls a Personal Learning Strategy (PLS). The PLS offers practical, step-by-step guidance—complete with self-assessments and exercises—so that leaders can understand how they learn best and extract more insight from their daily work and life experiences.

**“As someone who has participated in the journey of a company that has grown from \$4 million to \$40 billion, I found the core premise of this book really rings true. The learnings derived from the challenges faced in the book can be powerful tools in growing one’s business.”**

**Brad Anderson, CEO,  
Best Buy Co., Inc.**

## A unique approach built on rigorous research

The book concludes with a unique approach to leadership development that leverages crucible experiences. This innovative process builds a partnership between individuals and organizations. Individuals are responsible for bringing a clarity of purpose, an understanding of what motivates them, a desire to learn and the knowledge of how they learn best.

Organizations provide opportunities to learn technical skills and get real-time practice from teachers who provide feedback. In so doing, organizations equip aspiring leaders to mine their experiences, continuously and intensively, for insight into what it takes to lead, to grow as a leader and to cultivate leadership in others—peers and superiors, as well as subordinates.

Organizations commit themselves to providing robust resources and durable processes in three facets of learning from experience: prepare, deploy and renew.

### Prepare

Preparing leaders involves two key activities: helping people be clear about what lenses they use as observers, and helping them understand their own best learning style so that they can accelerate their learning as leaders.

For example, Boeing, the global aircraft company, prepares leaders to learn from experience through a comprehensive, multi-pronged program directly linked to business strategy. This includes a leadership center that serves as a training ground and crossroads for all the company's leaders. Collaborative learning features prominently, particularly experiences that familiarize leaders from disparate corners of the company with Boeing's

products and technologies and that help form shared mindsets among the next generation of leaders. The company has also created a database of leadership lessons that Boeing managers learned from specific assignments and a companion website that allows individuals and their career counselors to link to a wide variety of resources.

### Deploy

Effective deployment of experience can lead to more effective leader development. It also allows leaders to hone their sense-making skills—their ability to quickly and accurately read situations and people to ensure that they make the most of their experiences and to increase their ability to communicate what they've learned to others and to make practical use of their insights.

General Electric (GE), legendary for the attention it pays to selecting and developing leaders at all levels, weaves

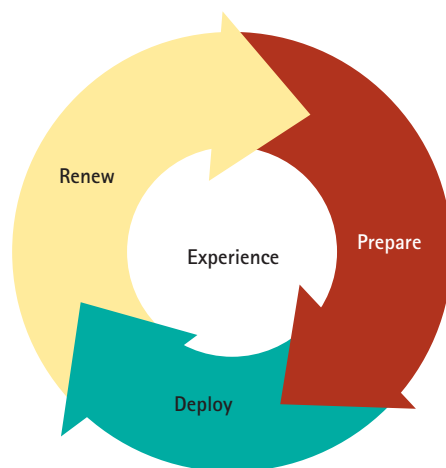
learning and doing into the fabric of its process and culture. Having decided that it is impossible to prepare for an uncertain future, the company makes leadership of change a core competence. GE aims to increase the number of leaders at all levels. The company's Work Out methodology—lionized for its contributions to performance improvement—is just as significant for the hands-on experience and training it gives to line employees, first- and second-level supervisors and managers in how to collaborate in solving problems and how to make and implement effective decisions in a timely way.

### Renew

Renewing leadership means having a teachable point of view—a perspective on leadership, about how one leads and why—that is grounded in personal experience. However, it must be open to adaptation and amendment as newer and different experiences and challenges

## Learning from experience

Organizations that successfully grow new leaders provide their people with tools and processes that help them to learn from their experiences in three major areas: preparing, deploying and renewing.



Source: Accenture analysis

### Prepare

- What do I aspire to?
- How do I learn best?

### Deploy

- How do my past experiences and values temper what I see?
- How can I practice leadership while I work?

### Renew

- How do I share what I've learned?
- How do I remain open to learning?

emerge—both from the individual leader's life and from the lessons shared among a community of leaders.

Toyota's culture and leadership philosophy are dedicated to learning as a way to avoid the traps of success. Four fundamental principles embedded in Toyota's production system illustrate the power of renewal through experience. First, direct observation is paramount. Toyota

managers learn early on to watch people and processes rather than jump to conclusions. Second, proposed changes are structured as experiments. Disciplined approaches increase understanding and make learning more efficient. Third, workers and managers experiment as frequently as possible. Small, simple experiments accelerate the pace of improvement and learning and also increase comfort and confidence with putting ideas at risk. Fourth, managers coach, they do not fix. Leaders are open to learning themselves and encourage others to learn, too. In other words, the benefits of experience get multiplied.

**“Bob displays exceptional understanding of the complex forces at work over any leader’s career. He employs this understanding here, providing a crisp roadmap to leading more effectively.”**

Jeff Wilke, COO, Amazon.com

## Six key take-aways

At its core, the book's research points to six conclusions:

1. Experience is the best teacher, but work is not the only experience that matters.
2. Crucible experiences are frequent and free, but you have to prepare for them.
3. Resilience—the ability to find calm in the midst of chaos—can be learned through practice.

4. Leadership is a performing art, but it takes deliberate practice and a Personal Learning Strategy to progress from novice to expert.

5. Practice can trump talent.

6. Organizations can leverage crucible experiences and stimulate Personal Learning Strategies to grow more leaders faster.

**“Perhaps the most valuable quality of Bob’s book is its wise pragmatism. We need wisdom we can act on, and this book is filled with actionable insights.”**

Warren Bennis, scholar, organizational consultant and best-selling author

## What's inside the book

Crucibles of Leadership: How to Learn from Experience to Become a Great Leader is divided into three parts, encompassing nine chapters. The preface is by Warren Bennis, widely regarded as a pioneer in leadership studies.

### Part I: Experience Matters—But Then What?

#### Chapter 1: Experience Matters

Experience matters, but what's more important is what leaders make of their experiences.

#### Chapter 2: Extracting Insight from Experience

Crucibles teach two lessons: one about leading and the other about learning. Lessons about learning are the more powerful of the two.

#### Chapter 3: Inside the Crucible

Resilience is what enables leaders to find calm in the face of chaos. Resilience can be learned.

#### Chapter 4: Leaders as Expert Performers

Practice can trump talent. Outstanding leaders practice while they perform.

### Part II: Crafting a Personal Learning Strategy

#### Chapter 5: The Core of a Personal Learning Strategy: Recognizing and Transforming Crucible Experiences

The difference between novices and experts—in leadership as well as in the performing arts—is a Personal Learning Strategy, an approach to learning that integrates personal aspirations, motivations and learning style.

#### Chapter 6: Exploring Your Capabilities

The starting point for crafting a Personal Learning Strategy is a candid self-assessment—for example, answering the question, “Why lead?”

#### Chapter 7: Creating Your Own Personal Learning Strategy

A step-by-step approach, with exercises and examples.

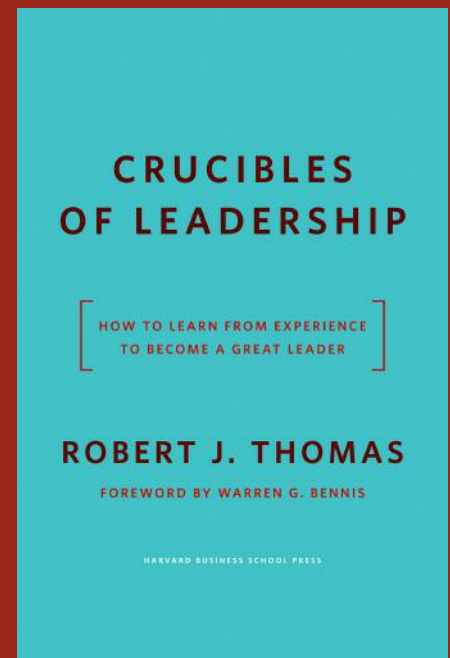
### Part III: The Big Picture

#### Chapter 8: Experienced-based Leader Development: The Organizational Dimension

Comparison of experience-based approaches in industry (Toyota, Boeing, Accenture, Ford Motor Company), in not-for-profits (MIT, Young Presidents Organization) and non-obvious examples (Mormon Church, Hells Angels).

#### Chapter 9: Invigorating the Practice of Leadership

The Personal Learning Strategy is a point of alignment between individuals and organizations—an original approach to leader development.



For more information on this book, please contact Eileen Moynihan at (617) 488-7789 or [eileen.m.moynihan@accenture.com](mailto:eileen.m.moynihan@accenture.com)

**“Robert Thomas takes readers in a new direction: toward understanding the burning challenges and even failures that turn ordinary people into great leaders. This practical book can help men and women from all walks of life rise to their full potential.”**

Rosabeth Moss Kanter,  
Harvard Business School



### About the Author

Robert J. Thomas is executive director of the Accenture Institute for High Performance Business. Specializing in leadership and organizational strategy, he is a published author with several books in this field. He is the John R. Galvin Visiting Professor of Leadership at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and has served as senior lecturer in the M.I.T. School of Engineering. He received his Ph.D. from Northwestern University.

Dr. Thomas has authored numerous books and articles on leadership, technology and organizational change. His book, **Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape**

**Leaders**, was published by Harvard Business School Press in 2002. The book received the honor of *Business Week* best-selling business book of 2003. **Geeks and Geezers** has been translated into German, Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, Spanish, Russian and Korean. He has published articles on related topics in the *Harvard Business Review*, *Harvard Management Update*, the *Sloan Management Review* and *Fortune* magazine. He is the recipient of the 1999 Breaking the Frame Award from the *Journal of Management Inquiry* and the 1995 C. Wright Mills Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems.

### About Accenture

Accenture is a global management consulting, technology services and outsourcing company. Committed to delivering innovation, Accenture collaborates with its clients to help them become high-performance businesses and governments. With deep industry and business process expertise, broad global resources and a proven track record, Accenture can mobilize the right people, skills and technologies to help clients improve their performance. With more than 175,000 people in 49 countries, the company generated net revenues of US\$19.70 billion for the fiscal year ended August 31, 2007. Its home page is [www.accenture.com](http://www.accenture.com).

### About the Accenture Institute for High Performance Business

The Accenture Institute for High Performance Business creates strategic insights into key management issues through original research and analysis. Its management researchers combine world-class reputations with Accenture's extensive consulting, technology and outsourcing experience to conduct innovative research and analysis into how organizations become and remain high-performance businesses.

  
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