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HOW DO YOU FIND WHAT MATTERS IN EXPERIENCE?

Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

-John F. Kennedy (speech prepared for delivery
in Dallas, Texas, November 22, 1963)

ARE YOU THE MOST EFFECTIVE LEADER you can be?

Most people will admit they aren't. They read books and articles, and attend the occasional workshop. In moments of doubt, they will search out a coach or a mentor. Like Tony Soprano, a surprising number watch the History Channel, hoping to glean some insight about how leaders are born and grown. Their intentions are good, but still they struggle to find a way to increase their leadership acumen-and that frustrates them.

The struggle is understandable. Time is scarce. People in management roles, whether in business, in government, or in non-profits, work so hard and so long that they just don't have time to spare, even for things that they might truly value, like developing themselves as leaders. It's hard to learn just from books and seminars. A classroom is a sterile environment, and the half life of most training is notoriously short. Learning styles vary enormously, and too often there isn't a good fit between teaching style and learning style. Off-site workshops may be good for clearing the head and a barefoot stroll over hot coals may boost self-confidence but it's tough to keep the learning fresh when you go back to a situation that's completely unchanged. And finally, it's difficult to learn just through observation. Too often people say they can only snatch a glimpse of good leadership in action and hearing someone deliver a great speech is not the same as sitting them down and picking their brains about how they do what they do.

Still, some people do grow and improve as leaders. Like consummate actors and athletes, they find ways to take it up one notch and then another and another. If they're not reading more

or attending more classes or they don't have loads of free time to reflect, how do they become more proficient? The answer is *experience*. For all the wide-ranging theories of effective leadership, almost everyone agrees that anyone who seeks to lead must get firsthand experience: get their feet wet and their hands dirty, seek out challenging assignments, volunteer for foreign postings, work for great leaders (and even for bad ones)-and learn as much as possible.

But there's a hitch. Two people can have the same experience and come away with profoundly different reactions: one may blossom and grow while the other is unchanged or even depleted. The same can be said for any pair of fired CEOs, successful project leaders, failed entrepreneurs, rookie supervisors, and those on international duty.

Experience by itself guarantees nothing.

To complicate matters, many memorable leadership experiences don't occur at scheduled times or in convenient places, like work or school. For instance, when pressed to identify an experience in which they learned something important about leadership or about themselves as leaders, the men and women interviewed for this book rarely pointed to events experienced in conventional training courses and MBA curricula. Instead, they described transformative events that occurred outside their professional lives as often as they cited ones that happened on the job. The most profound among those experiences-the *crucibles* that led to a new or an altered sense of identity-were nested in family life, wartime trauma, athletic competition, and/or personal loss far more often than in work assignments.

What exactly is a crucible? In medieval times it was the vessel in which alchemists attempted to turn base metals into gold. In a leadership context then, we can think of a crucible as a transformative experience from which a person extracts his or her "gold": a new or an altered sense of identity. A crucible is not the same as a life stage or transition, like moving from adolescence to adulthood or from midlife to retirement. Life stages can be stressful, even tumultuous; but, unlike crucibles, they tend to be gradual, reasonably predictable, and patterned.¹ Crucibles are more like trials or tests that corner individuals and force them to answer questions about who they are and what is really important to them.

Consider Bob Galvin, Motorola's visionary former CEO and chairman of the board, who shepherded the company from analog to digital technology and into the coveted status of preferred supplier to auto giants like Toyota. When I asked him to tell me about a time when he learned an important lesson about leading, Galvin remembered an event from his early years when he worked in one of his father's factories.

Galvin was just seventeen and he'd just made his first big mistake-one that shut down an assembly line. He knew that the plant supervisors could easily have had great fun at the expense of the boss's son. Instead, they helped him resolve the problem in minutes and said something that encouraged him to keep learning for the rest of his life: "I overheard one foreman saying to another, 'No problem with Bob. If he happens to screw it up, we can point it out to him and we can get on and get the job done right. Hopefully he does it right most of the time.'"² A small compliment, perhaps, but one that had a lasting effect on Galvin and on the company.

Galvin credits that factory foreman for helping him gain the confidence to make mistakes and to learn from them.

The moral of Galvin's story? While experience matters, what matters more is what one *makes* of experience: how a person comes to recognize in a crucible experience that something new or important is happening, to see beyond the discomfort, perhaps even the pain, of new and unexpected information and to incorporate that information as useful knowledge, not just about the world but, as likely, about oneself. Extracting insight from experience is a competence especially relevant to men and women in leadership positions in business and government, and to those who aspire to leadership, because their professional lives so often consist of complex, uncertain, and fluid situations for which there is no practical guide and where resolution depends on the exercise of judgment. Judgment can only be acquired through experience.

What distinguishes men and women who grow through a crucible experience is not breeding or intellect. Talent plays a role, undoubtedly, but it is a supporting role. No amount of native talent can prepare a leader for the infinite variety of circumstances she will face or the challenges she must surmount. No gene for resilience ensures that gems of wisdom will suddenly appear amid the turmoil of a crucible.

Instead, what sets these leaders apart 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 periods of reflection, they do both, often on a daily basis, sometimes in precisely the same moment. Rather than complain about the scarcity of time to learn, they make time. Like accomplished performers in sports or music or the arts, *they practice as strenuously as they perform*. And when, as often happens to organizational leaders, they 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.

This is a book *about* leaders who are skilled at transforming crucible experiences into lessons that make them personally more effective and that, more importantly, result in improved performance on the part of the organizations they lead. But this is a book *for* anyone who aspires to leadership. I say that because one of the most important findings of the research on which this book is based is that the ability to mine crucible experiences for insight *can be learned*. In fact, intensive, long-term conscious practice at it can trump native talent. Practice establishes a state of continuous preparedness: awareness of oneself and one's capabilities and alertness to important events, like crucible experiences, so that they can be learned from.

Crucible experiences are not only defining moments; they can also be a valuable starting point for discovering a form of practice closely attuned to an individual's aspirations and motivations something I refer to as a *Personal Learning Strategy*. That is, crucibles trigger a search for meaning: Why did this happen? Why did it happen to *me*? What should I learn from this for the future? Handled properly, crucibles can catalyze a vigorous and sustained interior dialogue that leads to deeper self-understanding and enhanced performance.

By paying close attention to the words and stories of a wide variety of leaders, we can gain skill in recognizing the context and the trajectory of a crucible experience. Moreover, we

can become alert to the "warning signs" of an impending crucible and identify the skills necessary to cope, respond, and learn. The goal of this book is to render that process visible and practical.

CRUCIBLES AND THE LESSONS THEY OFFER

This exploration of crucibles-what they teach and how leaders learn-builds on a foundation that Warren Bennis and I set in our book, *Geeks and Geezers*. That research was designed to uncover the ways that *era* (or the social, political, cultural, and economic milieu of one's maturing years) influences a leader's motivations and aspirations. We interviewed forty-three of today's top leaders in business and the public sector, limiting our subjects to people born in or before 1925, or in or after 1970.

To our delight we learned a great deal about how age and era affect leadership style (for a brief summary of key findings, see the box, "Geeks and Geezers"). Our older and younger leaders had very different ideas about paying your dues (interestingly, not about whether they should be paid, but *how*), work-life balance, the role of heroes, and more. But they also shared some striking similarities-among them a love of learning and a strong sense of values. Most intriguing was the fact that both our geeks and geezers told us again and again how certain experiences inspired them, shaped them, and, indeed, taught them to lead.

"Geeks and Geezers"

In *Geeks and Geezers* (published in paperback as *Leading for a Lifetime*),

Warren Bennis and I had the opportunity to interview at length a group of remarkable leaders who taught us a great deal about what distinguishes truly outstanding leaders from the rest. Three qualities, in particular, stood out as common to outstanding leaders, young and old. (see table 1-1):

- *Adaptive capacity* is the ability to learn-about yourself, about the world around you, about what it takes to adjust to, and to make, change.
- *Engaging others through shared meaning* is teaching and, in turn, listening-being an interactive leader, one who can enlist as well as command, and one who is capable of mobilizing the best in people through shared vision.
- *Integrity* is about knowing what you stand for-possessing a strong moral compass-and having the courage of your convictions; it is a process of self-knowledge that provides a core identity and a spine that remains strong even when circumstances demand that you adapt. Integrity is what keeps the leader from becoming a hollow dissembler or a leaf in the wind.

Adaptive capacity, the ability to engage others, and integrity are qualities that characterize outstanding leaders. They are not static, however. They are not achieved once and forever. They must be renewed because the circumstances that leaders face change constantly-and change demands a continuous demonstration of each quality if it is to remain a legitimate description of the leader.

Table 1

Qualities of outstanding leaders	
Qualities	Attitudes
Adaptive capacity	• Resilience • Creativity • Openness to new experience and a willingness to learn • Acute observational skill
Engaging others through shared meaning	• Deep sense of purpose and focus • Self-awareness and emotional intelligence • Obsessive and skilled communication • Comfort with dissent
Integrity	• Clear values and voice • Balance among ambition, technique, moral compass • Able to work with value conflicts • Knowledge of when to lead and how to follow

We came to call the experiences that shape leaders "crucibles," and for the leaders we interviewed, the crucible experience was a trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that challenged them to step up and be someone or do something they'd never been or done before. In some instances, crucibles were momentous events shared by many people, like World War II or the Great Depression; in others, crucibles were far more individual and private, like the loss of a loved one or a bankruptcy. Either way, crucibles required these leaders to examine their values, to question their assumptions, to hone their judgment. And in virtually every instance, they emerged from the experience stronger and more sure of themselves and their purpose-enhanced in some fundamental way.

Although we found the stories of our leaders studded with insight, we barely lifted the lid on the box of crucible experiences. We could not say, for example, whether crucibles followed a similar trajectory or whether, since some people reported being oblivious to what they were enduring at the time, conscious recognition of crucibles was necessary at all. And we only speculated as to whether the qualities that we found among learning leaders were themselves capable of being learned.

We also did not anticipate the resonant chord that the crucible concept struck with readers and listeners. Many wanted to share their own stories. Inadvertently, we'd tapped a rich vein of common experience—a highly personal and consequential event or relationship—that people felt not only shaped them, but also helped *explain* them. Sometimes their stories were emotional, cathartic even, and other times they were quite sublime. Sometimes they were told in private, over coffee, and other times they were shared in classrooms, boardrooms, or auditoriums. But in every instance, we found people driven to convey their own distinctive meaning, in much the

same way an artist might employ light, color, and shape or a musician might invoke pitch and rhythm to articulate something deeply personal and yet also profoundly universal.

PUTTING CRUCIBLES AT CENTER STAGE

In this book, I examine crucibles from several different angles as I search for answers to the challenging questions readers and leaders have raised. For example, what is life like inside a crucible? Is it possible to spot a crucible approaching or to divine when one has arrived? How do people make sense of their crucibles, much less learn from them? If, as we argued in *Geeks and Geezers*, adaptive capacity-or the ability to transcend adversity-is a defining quality of lifelong leaders, then is it possible for anyone to harness the power of experience? And finally, can organizations more effectively use crucible experiences to accelerate leader development?

A recurring point of comparison in this book will be between the crucibles experienced by organizational leaders and those experienced by men and women in other pursuits-for example, accomplished performers in the arts and athletics. While mindful that leading an organization is not the same as commanding a football team or choreographing a ballet, we will find a great deal to be gained from comparing the arc of learning and mastery that characterizes the careers of outstanding athletes, performing artists, and organizational leaders. In fact, my research provides valuable clues about expert performance and how it is the product of talent, experience (large and small, crucible and day-to-day), and disciplined practice.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

I have organized this book around four major findings from the research I've done since the publication of *Geeks and Geezers*. First, that *crucibles contain two vital lessons, not just one*. Second, that *practice can trump talent*. Third, that *outstanding leaders-consciously or unconsciously-devise a personal strategy for recognizing and transforming crucible experiences into lessons that keep them refreshed and responsive*. And finally, that *organizations can grow more leaders-and grow them faster-by helping individuals learn from experience*.

The three parts of this book address those findings to varying degrees. Part I explores how effective leaders learn from experience. Therefore, chapter 2, *Extracting Insight from Experience*, reveals the first finding, that *crucibles contain two lessons*: one lesson is about *leadership* and the other is about *learning*. Leadership lessons, while intensely meaningful on a personal level, are usually idiosyncratic: most are fascinating, but what they teach is rarely profound except, of course, to the person who endured them. Lessons about learning, on the other hand, are more subtle *and* more powerful: they reveal flaws or, in some instances, hidden strengths in the way one deals with new, perhaps even disconfirming, information. When addressed in a disciplined way, lessons can accelerate learning in the future-not just in learning from crucibles, but in learning from everyday experiments.

For example, many people struggle with the question of whether they should trust instinct or rely solely on reasoning and empirical evidence. A college president I know struggled with just that dilemma when faced with the threat of a violent confrontation between student groups during the Vietnam War. In the end, rather than calling in the police, he listened to his inner voice and interceded with an unconventional proposition that diffused the situation.

Crucible stories like his provide rare glimpses into the way instinct operates—for example, how and why memory, freighted as it often is with strong emotions and associations, can activate gut level responses, premonitory thoughts, and all the other trappings of instinct. Knowing that a sense of foreboding is intimately related to how one makes sense of the world can help tremendously when it comes to assessing how to read people and situations and make decisions—that is, all the things leaders are expected to do. More commonly, lessons about learning—for example, coming to understand that you only learn when your fear of learning is surpassed by your fear of the consequences of not learning—can encourage an individual to create conditions in the future that increase the odds of learning something new or to keep on learning despite all the traps (personal as well as structural) that might argue for relaxing on a bed of prior knowledge.

In chapter 3, *Inside the Crucible*, we go in search of clues as to why crucibles make some people better leaders and sap the energy and vitality from others. Along the way, we will see that crucibles vary in significant ways—not just in their magnitude but in the choices they present and the opportunities for learning they contain. Such insights help explain why some leaders will put themselves directly in the path of crucible experiences in order to enhance their likelihood of learning.

Chapter 4, *Leaders as Expert Performers*, offers examples from a growing body of research that corroborates the book's second major finding, that *practice can trump talent*, in leadership just as much as in sports and the performing arts. Without a doubt, talent matters. But the right kind and combination of ambition, instruction, and feedback can turn someone with modest talent into a viable competitor with so-called natural talents. In business as well as in the arts, outstanding performers are remarkably attentive to the opportunities for polishing basic skills—and testing new ones—that crop up in the midst of crucible experiences *and* day-to-day work. For them, the seam between practice and performance is invisible.

Part II shifts the focus to practice—that is, it translates ideas grounded in the research into positive actions that individuals can take to enhance their performance as leaders. Thus chapter 5, *The Core of a Personal Learning Strategy*, illuminates the book's third major finding, that *outstanding leaders—consciously or unconsciously—devise a personal strategy for recognizing and transforming crucible experiences into lessons that keep them refreshed and responsive* to the demands of a changing world. Paradoxically, although this personal strategy sets outstanding leaders apart from their peers, no one talks about it. It's a secret because for some, the competence is unconscious; they've incorporated it to the point that it's virtually impossible to articulate. For others, it's so much a part of their art, they rarely talk about it. However, it's possible to crack the code and put such a strategy within reach of every aspiring leader. This chapter, therefore, offers a practical, actionable guide to devising a Personal Learning Strategy (PLS). Creating and applying a PLS begins with the examination of one's own crucible experiences, aspirations, and learning style and concludes with a rigorous plan to increase

individual skill at learning from experience--:from crucibles as well as everyday situations. Chapters 6 and 7, therefore, show how a PLS can create a bridge between an individual's unique experiences, aspirations, and learning styles (things that only he or she can truly know) and the skills (e.g., communication, evaluation, decision making, and the like) and competencies (which often vary by industry and culture) expected of those selected to move into key leadership roles. Drawing from our interviews with outstanding leaders who have been tested through years of practice, chapter 6, *Exploring Your Capabilities*, provides a set of structured self-assessments that enable individuals to get a better sense of their strengths and weaknesses in the qualities that distinguish outstanding leaders: adaptive capacity, engaging others, and integrity. Chapter 7, *Creating Your Own Personal Learning Strategy*, in turn offers a very practical format for organizing and documenting a PLS.

Part III delves into the fourth major finding of this book: that *organizations can grow more leaders-and grow them faster-by helping individuals learn from experience*. In other words, organizations have a vital supporting role to play in helping individuals develop their Personal Learning Strategies and making the most of their crucible experiences. Despite the fact that a PLS is, by its very nature, an individual obligation and crucibles are difficult to schedule, organizations *can* create events and relationships, prepare and support participants to make the most of what they offer, and help them embed the critical things they have learned into their lives. They needn't jettison traditional approaches, but they will need to reorient them.

Chapter 8, *Experience-Based Leader Development*, then, examines innovations in a number of organizations, including Toyota, General Electric, Accenture, and Boeing, intended to leverage experience to grow leaders. Finding those to be positive but partial solutions, I widen the focus to include organizations like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Leaders for Manufacturing program and Ford Motor Company's Virtual Factory, where more systemic solutions are being developed. But for insight into the way experience-based learning has been thoroughly integrated into organizational functioning-to such an extent that leader development is a fortuitous by-product-I examine an unlikely pair of organizations: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) and the Hells Angels motorcycle gang. Distant though they may be from the mainstream of business (and certainly from each other), the Mormons and the Angels provide valuable clues as to how business and government might leverage experience to grow more leaders faster.

On that foundation, and incorporating the insights from research at the level of individuals, chapter 9, *Invigorating the Practice of Leadership*, proposes an original approach to leader development that leverages crucible experiences and establishes an important new role for senior management in the process of preparing, deploying, and renewing leaders. The goal of this concluding chapter is to show that it is both possible and essential for organizations to do more than just draft technical specifications for leaders in terms of competencies, courses, and criteria. Employers must also encourage individuals-or, at a minimum, those individuals who aspire to leadership-to craft Personal Learning Strategies and to use them as living documents or operating manuals, not something written once and forgotten.

Let's now take up the transformative experience of a crucible, first from the outside in and then from the inside out. A close examination from the outside in will reveal that not all crucibles are the same; they vary in texture, in duration, and, most importantly, in the lessons they offer. From the inside out-that is, from the perspective of the participant-we'll explore the experience of encountering and surmounting a crucible. Both perspectives are introduced in the following chapters, as part I continues.

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EXTRACTING INSIGHT FROM EXPERIENCE?

To be thrown upon one's own resources is to be cast into the very lap of fortune; for our faculties then undergo a development and display an energy of which they were previously unsusceptible.

--Benjamin Franklin

PEOPLE WHO UNDERGO A CRUCIBLE and grow through the experience

all share something vital: they don't become stuck. No matter how much they struggle, no matter how much they may grieve, and no matter how much they may chafe at finding themselves in situations they cannot immediately control, they are not paralyzed by difficult situations. Where others see chaos and confusion, they see opportunities to learn and grow.

This chapter explores the role of crucibles in the education of a leader and begins to examine the first of the four major findings from my recent research—specifically, that *crucibles contain two valuable lessons, not just one: lessons in leadership and lessons in learning*. Here we search for answers to core questions about how leaders learn, like what is life like inside a crucible? How do people make sense of their crucibles, much less learn from them? And perhaps most importantly, can anyone harness the power of experience—or is that a reward reserved for a favored few?

I have already defined a crucible as a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity. But look closely at the crucible experience, and you will see distinctive contours and trajectories. Crucibles invariably rupture

the status quo. Sometimes they sever a comfortable web of relationships, as in the case of war, insurrection, or terrorist attack. Sometimes they change a person's expectations dramatically and unpredictably, such as when a policeman is thrust into the role of wartime commander or when a consummate insider is expelled by her comrades. Other crucibles challenge an individual's identity, like the wrenching episodes of self-doubt occasioned by bankruptcy, loss of an election, or the death of a loved one. People experience crucibles most commonly as a profound tension or conflict between opposing forces.

Despite their differences, a powerful unifying theme emerges from close study of the variety of crucible stories: crucibles catalyze the process of learning *from experience*. Consider, for example, the following story from Major Joe Rupp, U.S. Marine Corps and a commander in Desert Storm.

Early in his career, Rupp took leave from the military to fulfill his missionary obligation to the Mormon church where he would learn things about leading that he'd overlooked in officer candidate school (OCS). Assigned to a village in Mexico, he and a companion were making their rounds, meeting church members on a particularly hot day. "This was really unfamiliar territory to me," he recalled. "Despite having been through boot camp and OCS, I was basically still this kid from Utah." So when a village woman offered the young men some refreshing papaya water, they eagerly accepted. "She chopped that papaya up and threw it in a bucket of water and threw some sugar in there and gave it to us," Rupp said. "And I drank three glasses. I was thirsty and didn't want to offend anyone."

His politeness cost him dearly. He got a case of dysentery that made him drop twenty pounds within a week. He was so sick that at one point he asked his zone leader whether he could call his mother. "I'd been a Marine. I was strong," he recalled. "I knew all about going on a mission. And there I am in front of my zone leader crying. All I want to do is just call my mom because I feel absolutely miserable. But he said, 'No. I'm not going to let you call your mom. That's not why you're here. You didn't come here so you can get sick and feel sorry for yourself and call your mom. When Christ was here on earth, he suffered the same things that the people on earth suffered. And these type of infirmities are what these people down here deal with every day. This isn't about you. It's about them.'" Rupp said his leader's words had such an effect on him that he wrote them down. "That situation taught me a great lesson: that I should not be so focused on myself and look at situations only as how they affect me."

While in OCS, Rupp had been advised repeatedly to put his people ahead of his own needs (and to avoid untreated water), but those lessons never really took root. That bout of dysentery put his view of himself into stark relief-in a way that classroom instruction and even Marine training couldn't. He "mattered," as he was reminded by his zone leader, but not in the way Rupp had thought: not at the center of the situation, but as a part of the situation. A mild rebuke, perhaps, and certainly not an earth-shattering experience, but it forced Rupp to both recognize and resolve a tension between his vision of himself and his role and the expectations that others had of him.

Later, as a helicopter pilot and commander in Desert Storm, he recalled his experience in that little Mexican town and counseled his peers as well as his direct reports about the

importance of attending to the needs of the local population before grouching about the heat, dust, and sand. It is also important to note that Rupp, like many leaders we studied, did not go through his crucible alone. The lessons he learned were intensely personal, but in his case (and others I'll explore later), a teacher, a guide, a mentor, or a coach played an essential role in helping him sharpen his focus, to see what truly mattered in the situation he faced. Crucible experiences like Rupp's teach something deep and enduring about how to behave (or how not to) in the face of real impairment and demoralization. In fact, my analysis of nearly two hundred crucible experiences pointed to three major types, each with its own unique signature. (See the box, "Crucibles in a Career Perspective.") Some involve encounters with the new or unknown, which I refer to as *new territory*. These crucibles *sharpen an individual's alertness to new information and his or her skill at sense making in the midst of confusion*. A second type of crucible involves loss, impairment, defeat, or failure of the kind that Rupp faced; I refer to this as *reversal*. Reversal teaches both *endurance and imagination*. Finally, there are the crucibles that involve an extended period of contemplation or deliberation, which I refer to as *suspension*. Suspension challenges a leader to *clarify his or her values and purpose in life*.

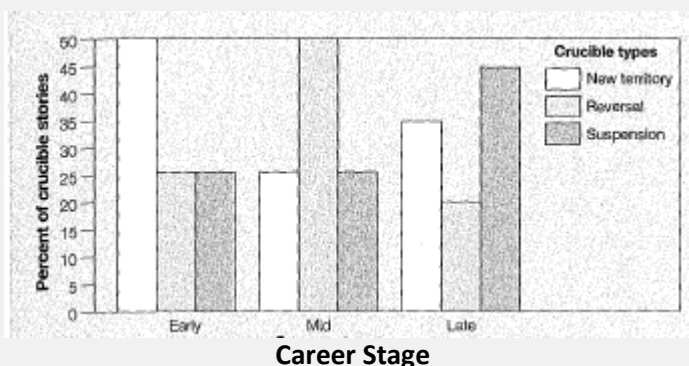
Crucibles in a Career Perspective

THE SAMPLE OF CRUCIBLE STORIES was assembled in the following way: (1) individuals were asked to identify an event or a relationship through which they learned something important about leadership or about themselves as leaders; (2) they were then asked to locate that event or relationship in time and space. The stories counted here were, for the most part, the first or the second story an individual offered. Reasoning that these stories are likely to be the most salient to that individual, I then tallied them by type and career stage.

While further testing of these results is clearly warranted, several interesting interpretations are possible, and as I will argue in later chapters, they have important implications for how individuals and organizations use crucible experiences for the purpose of leader development. Several observations are worth noting.

FIGURE 2-1

Crucible types throughout career stages



First, the association between crucible type and career stage is striking. That is, crucibles involving new territory were much more likely to occur in early career (even

before one's entry into the labor market). This makes sense because one would expect new locales and relationships to be more frequent among people just starting out. The high frequency of stories about reversal among men and women at midcareer are also understandable. That is, they are more likely to have arrived at a position where mistakes, failures, or losses on the job and in relationships would be more consequential; more is at stake, in other words. Finally, the largest fragment of crucibles described by older, late-career leaders involved some sort of suspension or time-out from routine affairs. One possible explanation could have to do with the increased likelihood of voluntary or involuntary breaks caused by illness, unemployment, or job change.

Second, the more frequent experience of new territory among leaders at the beginning and toward the end of their careers suggests that they share something in common. In *Geeks and Geezers*, Warren Bennis and I drew attention to *neoteny*: a characteristic of older leaders who'd remained active and vital across eras and organizations. Neoteny, we argued, is the quality of retaining youthful habits and behaviors, like curiosity, and openness to experience, and surprise, well into one's later years. The collection of crucibles seems to suggest that those who continue to explore new territory as they age are likely to remain vital and active as leaders. This was borne out in the interviews with people like Walter Sondheim, John Wooden, Sidney Harman, Warren Bennis, and Frances Hesselbein, who recounted for us new territory crucibles they had experienced over the past ten years. This restless urge to learn new things by being exposed to new territory, as we will see in the next chapter, is shared by performing artists who continue to excel even as they age.

All three types of crucible test an individual's adaptive capacity and resilience in the face of trying circumstances. Each crucible represents a different kind of problem, but what they share in common is a fundamental tension. Like a stretched rubber band, a crucible embodies potential energy-energy that can be released productively or unproductively. In the following sections, we'll consider examples of each type of crucible, first in the context of lessons they have to teach about *leadership* and then through the lens of lessons that each type has to teach about *learning*.

LESSONS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

Crucibles teach powerful leadership lessons. Repeatedly, the lessons people extract from their times of trial became touchstones they carry with them for the rest of their lives. Crucible stories are, in many respects, the raw material from which outstanding leaders derive their core qualities-that is, these are lessons about adapting and growing, about discovering new ways to engage or enroll others in a shared pursuit, and about recognizing the right thing to do and summoning the courage to do it.

Let's begin by looking at the kinds of leadership lessons that crucible experiences in new territory can foster.

New Territory

Being thrust into a new terrain—an overseas assignment, an unexpected turn of events in business or family life, a new social or organizational role—carries with it a challenge not simply to survive but also to prosper in unfamiliar soil. The challenge is to overcome the disorientation and weave it into one's own experiential tapestry, rather than being consumed in the newness, confusion, and deluge of foreign sensations. For many of the leaders with whom we spoke, the crucible was a dividing line that, once crossed, forever heightened their alertness to the power of experience.

Consider the example of Patrick Mellon (not his real name), an executive highly regarded for his track record as a leader of corporate turnarounds. Over the course of nearly three decades and in a dozen companies, he has earned a reputation as a tough-as-nails negotiator who can stare down creditors, soothe anxious investors, and rally the spirits and the energies of employees and pensioners with the greatest personal stakes to lose.

When asked about a time in his life in which he learned something important about leadership, Mellon paused and took a breath before describing an event that occurred when he was a teenager pledging membership in a high school honor society. "They dropped me in the woods in what had to be the darkest, the most isolated corner of this huge forest," he began, "and they made me swear on my mother's grave to not remove the blindfold until I could no longer hear them. This was part of the test. If I could find my way back to camp, I'd be accepted into the society." When Mellon finally removed the blindfold, he found himself in complete darkness, in a place so pitch-black that he couldn't see the hand in front of his face. "I didn't dare move because I couldn't tell if I was on the edge of a cliff or at the bottom of a pit," he recalled.

That's when it hit him: he was utterly alone, in a way he'd never been before in his fifteen years. "I started to shiver and panic," he said. "I moaned out loud. I broke down and cried. It's embarrassing to tell you this. Gone completely was the Eagle Scout who had all these merit badges. I was totally, completely panicked and sure that I would never find my way back to camp, that I would be lost there, fall off a cliff, break my leg ... or worse, that they would have to mount a search and it would be on TV and I would be embarrassed beyond belief."

After about two hours, Mellon recalled, he finally calmed down. "It was like one half of me—the rational half—had to talk the other, irrational half through a crisis. I'd never had to calm myself like that before." That night he learned two important things about himself, he said: that he is capable of panic—and of leading himself out of panic.

Still, the fact that he's capable of panic is why he preferred to use a pseudonym for his interview: for fear that his direct reports might lose confidence in him. Today when he starts to feel panic coming on, he said he stops and takes a few deep breaths. "And I recall what I learned when I was 15. I walk myself mentally back through situations where I've faced that kind of stress and uncertainty before. And I recall what I did to sort things out, how I behaved, how I enlisted other people to help me, and how we created a solution where it didn't look like one was possible."

Given that Mellon was in the midst of a difficult turnaround assignment at the time of our interview, his choice of crucibles to relate was probably not coincidental. But in that story, he

revealed how he had transformed his own sense of weakness and shame a profound tension between the way he'd always thought about himself and the young man immobilized by fear in that dark corner of a forest-into a strategy for managing himself and others around him in times of distress bordering on panic.

But what real impact did Mellon's experience have on his later behavior as a leader? He said, "It made me a more compassionate leader. Up until that time, I'd never met a challenge I couldn't take on and beat. But here was a situation where the stakes turned out to be much, much higher than I'd ever faced before. I just suddenly realized that this was real-not an exercise, not a classroom test, not me scampering down a rock wall with a belay rope there to save my ass if I did something stupid. There was no walking away." He understood for the first time what it meant to be face-to-face with forces he couldn't control. As a leader today, Mellon said, that experience as a teenager later helped him understand how people, from executives to blue-collar workers, feel when higher-ups make a radical change that affects their lives. "I realized something about the panic that other people must feel when things just suddenly fall apart-like losing your job or seeing your pension evaporate. I learned that panic can be real, that I could experience it, and that fortunately I could also work my way out of it. And so could other people," Mellon said. "It's a truth I've tried to pass along to the people I mentor."

His memory of that crucible-and the way he resolved the tension and he drew himself out of it-have enabled him to cope with the vexing, contentious, and worrisome situations that beset an organization or a community in crisis, situations he faced dozens of times over the years. Indeed, that night in the woods alerted him to the learning opportunities that are so often deeply embedded in crisis.

Another leader whose crucible experience involved new territory was Ling Yun Shao, a sergeant in the U.S. Army Reserve. Shao, named by a leading women's magazine as one of the top ten women leaders in U.S. colleges, initially applied for an ROTC scholarship in order to pay for college. However, after a year of what she dismissed as "simulated soldiering," she enlisted in the regular army and went through basic training. As it was for the millions of men and women who preceded her, boot camp was an eye-opener for Shao. Even though she learned a great deal about American diversity (having grown up in a fairly sheltered suburban environment after her parents emigrated from China), the leadership crucible she nominated as most influential in her life occurred in her first assignment.

Trained as a medic but aspiring to be a doctor, Shao found herself thrust into a netherworld between hurricane relief and military "police action" when, in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, she was dispatched to a field hospital on the border between El-Salvador and Nicaragua-which was considered a hostile-fire zone. She recalled, "I was supposed to have an officer who ran a battalion aid station. But the day before we left, she got sick, so for the time I was there I was left to run the battalion aid station alone. And it was the best leadership experience I've ever had." Although she didn't do any highly skilled medical procedures, she felt she helped people take care of themselves. "All I had was bandages and ointments, but I felt like I had made this enormous difference," she said. "And these people lined up for literally a mile outside of the base, just to come in and have someone look at their wound."

Providing care, solving problems, and mobilizing people to do great things with limited resources emerged for Shao to be a compelling definition of what it meant to be a leader—especially when contrasted with the nightmare of insurance forms and bureaucratic regulation she knew to be the norm in U.S. medical care. The experience of doing familiar things in an unfamiliar territory opened her eyes to the tension between the results she truly wanted to achieve and the limits of conventional practice in the U.S. medical establishment. Shao therefore reset her sights: her goal after gaining her medical degree is to establish a clinic in South Boston for immigrants who lack insurance but who are, in her words, "contributing members to society." A crucible experience in new territory both demands and teaches an almost preternatural alertness. It encourages an openness to signals and guidance, often from unanticipated sources, that makes it possible over time to get more skilled at detecting impending traps and diversions. See table 2-1 for more leadership lessons drawn from interviews about crucible experiences in new territory.

Reversal

The loss of a loved one, a divorce, bankruptcy, or failure in a major assignment can be profoundly disruptive and disconfirming. At its core is another form of tension: something thought to be permanent turns out to be transient, or something believed to be true turns out to be false. A reversal can bring a leader to understand her situation in a fundamentally new-and more comprehensive-way.

TABLE 2-1

New territory: lessons about leadership*

- Don't assume anything about a situation; you'll likely be wrong if you rely on your first impression.
- Leaders need to ask questions as often as they give answers.
- Be aware of the lenses you bring to a situation; a leader needs to question himself or herself.
- Learn to rely on others; a leader needs to be able to trust other people. When you're new to a leadership situation, find common ground by telling stories and getting people to share theirs.
- Remember that sometimes events can conspire to make you a leader.

These lessons were extracted from interviews.

Case in point: Jeff Wilke, senior vice president of online retailer Amazon.com and widely regarded for his rare combination of being both people savvy and numbers driven, recalled a major reversal that became a turning point in his education as a leader: at a chemical plant where he worked before joining Amazon.com, one of his employees died on the job. He said he went through a lot of soul-searching. "How could this happen? Who's responsible? Or are we in some way responsible?" he wondered. "You start to question all these things and to go to the town, to meet his widow, to speak at the plant, to spend a week with these folks and to understand their

pain and to try to help them through what's happened. It's a transformational experience. So you can convince yourself in an industrial environment that leadership is about making money, making the quarter-and at the end of the day you get to go home to your nice cushy urban or suburban life style. But in the end it's all these lives that are all wrapped up together, and every so often an event happens that isn't just about whether we made the quarter. It hits you square in the face."

Though Wilke had always prided himself on his analytical skills, he recognized that he and his coworkers faced events that could not be resolved through detached calculation. There was a profound tension induced by the need to reconcile two very different modes of thinking and behaving. Within weeks he began to notice a profound change in the way he thought about his job: "I was no longer willing to focus on the business as detached from everything else that happened along with it. I began to give myself permission to have emotion about my work. At the end of the day leadership is about people, and you can't separate their lives from their work or your work."

The ability to find meaning and strength in adversity distinguishes leaders from non leaders. When terrible things happen, less-able people feel singled out, powerless, even victimized. Leaders find purpose and resolve. The experience of reversal, like Wilke's, challenges the individual to transcend narrow self-regard and reflect on the self in relation to others. Reversals are often places where one becomes intensely aware of his or her connectedness. Above all, they are experiences from which one extracts meaning that leads to new definitions of self and new competencies that better prepare one for the next crucible.

Sometimes the tension at the core of reversal is not loss or failure, but profound disconfirmation, even contradiction. Consider a story from Edwin Guthman, now professor emeritus at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communications, and widely acclaimed for both his reporting at the *Seattle Times* (where he won a Pulitzer Prize) and his leadership as national editor at the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He was working as a press secretary for Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in the early 1960s when he had his crucible experience that taught him something important about leadership.

The time was September 1962, and the place was Oxford, Mississippi, on the campus of the University of Mississippi. Guthman was stationed by a pay phone along with other Justice Department officials in a campus building while an angry and armed crowd threatened to riot in opposition to the registration of James Meredith, a young black man, at the university. According to Guthman, "There were about 300 marshals and five or six of us from the Justice Department. We are besieged by a mob of a couple thousand people and we have tear gas and we're armed and we're able to hold off the mob, although ultimately 29 of the marshals are wounded by gunfire. The injured are laying on the floor of the Lyceum Building. And there's an Army division on its way down from Memphis."

That's when he and other members of his group decided it was time to ask permission to use their weapons. Deputy Attorney General Nick Katzenbach made the call to Robert Kennedy. The answer? An unequivocal "No!" Guthman recalled, "And there's a discussion about this. We're really pissed off because we think we're going to get killed!" Most of all, Guthman himself

felt outraged that Kennedy, this young thirty-five-year-old attorney general-with no previous military experience, at that-was leaving his own staff people in such a vulnerable position.

But of course none of them were killed, and a few hours later the army showed up and things quieted down. Later, the group involved met in the Justice Department to critique how they'd handled that situation. They realized that if Robert Kennedy had given them permission to fire, it would have been an utter disaster. "Imagine if we'd fired into this mob!" said Guthman. He and his colleagues met several times in subsequent days, on their own and with no prompting from Kennedy, to try to understand how they got to a point where they were urging the attorney general to take arms against fellow citizens.

That painful and in many ways embarrassing process of reflection proved fateful to Guthman. Despite his initial anger at Kennedy-an anger fueled as much by Kennedy's youth and lack of military experience as by Guthman's fear of impending harm-Guthman volunteered Kennedy's decision as a powerful influence on his behavior as a leader in years to come. In his words: "We realized how important that decision was, but we also realized that we had made some mistakes ... Looking back, I've often learned from this. When something happens, go in and try to figure it out, not blame somebody, but so you don't make the same mistakes. You should always take the time to confront the problem; face up to it."

It was a powerful lesson about the need to recognize the tension between personal ego and the welfare of others that can accompany high-stakes decision making. Guthman's resolve as a leader to think decisions through and to ask the tough questions of himself and the people who worked for him was tested several times over the course of his career. For example, when the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published an editorial criticizing Israel's invasion of Lebanon and Guthman and his staff were roundly chastised for their position, he spent weeks meeting with Jewish organizations in his own investigation to determine whether the paper had made the right decision.

Reversal tests both wherewithal and imagination. It stretches to the limits an individual's self-confidence. At the same time, reversal sharpens the ability to see beyond or through bleak circumstances to another set of outcomes. Reversal teaches leaders the power of optimism and the courage to reflect honestly on one's own shortcomings. See table 2-2 for more examples of leadership lessons learned through reversal.

TABLE 2-2

Reversal: lessons about leadership*

- Leaders need to remember the importance of interdependence-that life is not just about the business; an organization is a community of human beings.
- Leaders need to care about interpersonal relationships and be willing to be cared about.
- A leader doesn't have to be superhuman or have all the answers, no matter how much people may wish it to be so.
- Failing is only a step on the path to success.

- Trouble doesn't last forever.
- Know what you stand for as a leader before crisis hits; when things are crashing down around you and people are looking for your leadership, it's too late to figure things out.
- Integrity is the only thing you have that's truly yours.

These lessons were extracted from interviews.

Suspension

Crucibles of this type involve a hiatus, often one that is unanticipated, during which a well-known set of behaviors and routines is set aside, sometimes forcibly, and replaced with a regimented structure or no structure at all. Suspension has at its core a tension between realities-old and new, immediate and indeterminate, comforting and uncomfortable-and with that tension an opportunity for both exploration and reflection. College, prolonged unemployment, and jail time can be crucibles, particularly as they afford time and space to explore other possible selves and lifestyles. The same can also be said for entry into more severely structured settings-"total institutions" like a boot camp or a convent-that demand a wholesale change in identity.¹

Suspension challenges leaders to clarify-or, in some instances, to create-their personal mission and purpose; to cement their own personal foundation of beliefs and values.

Ali Omar, a captain in the Palestinian security forces who had been active in the Fatah branch of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement since the age of fifteen, recalled a time in the heat of battle and its aftermath when he realized that he could be imperfect and yet still be an effective leader. From an early age, he had looked to the commanders under whom he served for his models of leadership. One leader in particular, the acting commander of a major city force, had a profound effect on him. "He had joined the forces after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank," Omar recalled. "I believed that he knew everything, that he had the answer to all questions, the solution to all the problems, and the knowledge to lead us in critical situations."

At a decisive juncture, however, this commander faltered hesitating and looking confused-leaving Omar and his comrades to their own devices. With the commander unable to lead them, Omar suddenly found himself in charge of leading a group of men to defend a neighborhood. "[The commander] sent me a message saying simply that I had to depend on myself and to stop sending correspondents asking for orders," he said. "I recognized then how difficult it is to be a leader, especially when defending a city and protecting civilians and trying to give the right orders to the soldiers without making a mistake that I would regret to the last day in my life."

Importantly, the order for Omar to make his own decisions came not from a commander too busy to attend to the pestering of an underling; it came from a man who had suddenly lost his will to lead, who had withdrawn into a shell from which pleas could not extract him.

Captain Omar described the feeling as a "slap in the face," akin to being rejected by a father figure. Even worse, this father figure had revealed himself to be a coward, afraid, self-absorbed, and completely without regard for those in his charge. Omar felt acute pain in those moments. He felt both empathy for and fury toward his commander. He questioned his own ability to lead but would not walk away from his men. He concluded, "I learnt from this great experience that nothing can change the fact that all of us are human beings who may make mistakes any moment that can cause a lot of losses. But a man can also take the risk and act in an unexpected way and develop himself to a certain level where he surprises everybody, including himself. And I think this is what happened to me."

Among other things, Omar decided in the wake of that crucible to dedicate himself to something he'd never considered possible previously: to become an active participant in the process of creating a viable Palestinian state and to help secure its place in the international community through diplomatic service.

Suspension challenges individuals to create structures, first for themselves and then, potentially, for others. By snatching people out of a familiar web of relationships that appear self-sealed and lasting and inserting them into what can feel like free fall, suspension calls forth the ability to impose meaningful rules on oneself- to create a foundation of values and meaning on which to stand and then perhaps to extend that foundation into organizing principles for one's life, one's pursuits, and one's relationships. Table 2-3 offers further examples of leadership lessons learned through the experience of suspension.

TABLE 2-3

Suspension: lessons about leadership*

- It is crucial for you, as a leader, to have a purpose or mission; people respond to your earnestness and authenticity as much as to your logic.
- Leaders need to be at peace with themselves before they can ask others to be peaceful;
- leaders need to be clear about what they value if they expect others to be driven by their values .
- Leaders don't need to be bulletproof: although it's scary not to have all the answers, it can help engage others in the decision-making process.
- Leaders need to roll with the punches and be ready to acknowledge when they're wrong.

These lessons were extracted from interviews.

Each story just recounted about crucibles involving new territory, reversal, and suspension had at its core a tension, a kind of potential energy, that demanded a behavior or maybe an answer that either did not exist previously or went unrecognized. Although some of the lessons in leadership learned from these crucible experiences may not seem particularly new or noteworthy, the

manner in which these leaders recounted them was dramatic indeed-and therein lies a key aspect of effective leadership.

As the scholar Noel Tichy argues, leaders must be teachers and the leaders in this chapter offer precisely what Tichy calls a "teachable point of view."² He argues that leaders' responsibility is not only to provide direction or judgment in the moment, but to strive continuously to develop leadership in others, now and into the future. Stories, especially stories of trial and transcendence, provide a foundation for a teachable point of view. They provide the grit and detail, the suspense, and the credibility that turns what might otherwise sound like a homily into something that screenwriter Robert McKee once termed "advice with substance."³

Let's turn now to the lessons that each of the three types of crucibles have to teach about learning itself.

LESSONS ABOUT LEARNING

Although leadership lessons gained from crucible experiences are valuable enough in themselves, crucibles go a step further to offer lessons in learning as well: the subtext to virtually every crucible story reveals the conditions associated with gaining new, useful knowledge. The men and women who recounted their stories in this chapter, then, also gained deep insights *about how they learn-about* what it takes for them as capable and accomplished people to learn new things, to resolve the tensions inherent in a crucible, and to raise the level of their performance. They each described a powerful flywheel effect: once alerted to what it takes to draw insight from experience, they began seeing learning opportunities all around them.

Lessons about learning are arguably *more valuable* than leadership lessons, per se, because learning is what enables an individual to grow and adapt to changing circumstances. Indeed, lessons about learning make it possible to even recognize that circumstances are changing, that adaptation is needed, and that growth is possible. Liken it to the difference between a novice and an expert in virtually any artistic or athletic domain (a theme to which we return in the next chapter): a neophyte delights in accidentally executing a difficult move, be it a dance step, a chess maneuver, or a tricky approach shot in golf; but an expert appreciates the combination of skill and practice it takes to execute consistently and notices the learning opportunity in even the most elegant and seemingly flawless move. Learning about learning makes it possible to take control of one's education, to learn better and faster, and to adapt and grow across time, across circumstances, and across organizations.⁴

Lessons about learning often had to be teased out of offhand remarks, such as Bob Galvin's comment (from the example in chapter 1) about the encouragement he received from a factory foreman.⁵ Sometimes these lessons are overlooked or taken for granted but that doesn't mean they're not critically valuable. Some leaders, like performers in other domains, are unconsciously competent. They literally cannot describe what they do when they lead or how they learned to do it. That doesn't make them less effective or less likely to learn from experience. However, those who are aware of how they learn-and learn best or most deeply and

durably seem to learn with greater economy and speed. They are also better at explaining what they know to apprentices and proteges, meaning that they are likely to leave *more* leaders in their wake. Their conscious competence does not slow them down or render them paralyzed by self-analysis. In fact, it enhances their ability to spot learning needs and opportunities in themselves and in others. How does learning about learning manifest itself? In my interviews and in discussions with leaders about crucibles, I would ask not only what they learned but *how* they learned it. I asked, "What made it possible for you to learn what you learned? If I were to change one thing about your story that would have made it ordinary, what would that be?"

Answers to those questions yielded valuable and sometimes surprising clues as to how some leaders learn from experience. Most importantly, learning from crucibles (and, I'll later argue, learning from any experience) tended to occur when the individual could identify a connection among three things: their personal *aspirations* (i.e., what they pictured as their best or ideal self), their *motivations* (what they most deeply valued), and their *learning style* (how they learned best or most effectively).⁶

For example, Jeff Wilke earlier recounted the epiphany that occurred to him with the tragic loss of an employee at a plant he managed. He described it as an insight about the connectedness among people that a leader needs to comprehend, honor, and support. He also talked about the insight that crucible had teased out of him *about himself*-how he needed to more effectively resolve the tension between the emotional aspects of work (and himself) and the analytical. When pressed to "go deeper" and explore the conditions surrounding that learning, he began to talk about the importance of being out of his comfort zone, to be confronted with facts and with feelings that were unfamiliar, and to acknowledge that the whole package-situation, resources, emotions-created an opening for better understanding the world and himself.

Ling Yun Shao's experience as a medic in El Salvador clarified her self-perception. Moreover, in comparing her role in that village with what she knew she'd do as a doctor in an American hospital, Shao got a rare glimpse into both her core motivations (healing, not prestige) and her preferred learning style (hands-on, interactive, kinesthetic).

Sidney Harman, founder of Harman International (previously Harman-Kardon) and former deputy secretary of commerce about whom Warren Bennis and I wrote at length in *Geeks and Geezers*, talked about two important insights he had regarding his own learning style. First, he believed that through his daily journal entries, he could literally see what was on his mind: what questions he needed to answer and what answers were forming. (Brandeis University president Jehuda Reinharz and legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden also told me that writing helped clarify their own learning.) Second, Harman claimed that by spending time with masters in a given field-working alongside them, interviewing them as a journalist or historian might-he "borrowed energy" from their passion and depth of understanding to aid him in gaining insight into that field quickly and effectively. For example, in order to deepen his understanding of what jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis wanted his horn to sound like when reproduced by Harman-Kardon stereo equipment, Harman studied and questioned Marsalis the way a music critic might.

But how do the seeds for such lessons about learning come about in the first place-and how does a leader learn to recognize and cultivate them? Engaging in what I call a *Personal Learning Strategy* is key.

The Personal Learning Strategy

The ability to recognize the tension at the core of a crucible and to convert the energy of a crucible to productive uses through awareness of one's own aspirations, motivations, and learning style these represent the foundation of a Personal Learning Strategy. Such a strategy enables two things: (1) it guides an individual in identifying learning needs and opportunities, and (2) it provides insights about what conditions, resources, and supports are most likely to result in improved performance.

For some leaders, the interviews I conducted about crucible experiences turned into explorations of the contours of the individual's Personal Learning Strategy: what an individual might have described as "restlessness" or "entrepreneurial spirit" would, on closer inspection, reveal an intuitive self-understanding that learning can be either pleasant or unpleasant but that it most likely occurs under fairly specific circumstances. For example, Bill Porter, founder of the first completely online brokerage, E-TRADE, prided himself on the "problem-finding" skills he applied with as much gusto to organization building as he did to helping develop satellite stabilizers, measurement devices, and electronic exchanges.

In other instances, the people interviewed clearly recognized how they learned best-and they routinely engaged that knowledge as a guide for their next project or assignment or personal challenge. Sometimes, as in the case of former SEC chair Arthur Levitt Jr., they became seekers of crucibles, constantly looking for the kinds of challenges that would stretch them. In a career of more than fifty years, Levitt served in the air force, was both a cattle rancher and an editor at *Look*, and served, under President Clinton, as chairman of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. "What I believe is important in life is to keep as many doors open as possible," Levitt explained. "You close a door when you fall in love with a community and say you won't move. I'll move any place. I couldn't care less where. And I think that's important. You re-pot yourself."

A Personal Learning Strategy, then, is an individualized routine or recipe for learning, with a special quality to it: its function is to challenge other routines-that is, to uncover patterns of activity that can, through repeated use, become habitual, stagnant, resistant to change, obsolete, ineffective, and, ultimately, destructive. The ability to *engage* this unique routine is nearly as important as the routine itself. The same attentiveness to situations that enables some people to spot trends, to see market opportunities, or to discern openings for negotiating through an impasse gets applied *internally*. The same resolve to act that propels an organization to move when an opportunity is spotted gets applied to the self. Warren Bennis, interviewed about his experience as a university president, talked about learning as a spark of insight, sometimes a "premonition about what I need to do or to be in order to avoid getting mired in habit." People attuned to learning are what Saul Bellow once described as "first-class noticers "-not just of the world, but of themselves, too.

On the other hand, a Personal Learning Strategy is not just the state of self-awareness or situational awareness described in recent writings as "emotional intelligence." Those qualities are real and important, but they do not quite capture the potential of a Personal Learning Strategy: the potential it contains for propelling an individual, a leader, forward into situations and relationships that will cause him or her to put to the test enduring, but potentially obsolete, ideas and behaviors, or to encounter things (relationships, cultures, technologies, and worldviews) that are not only unfamiliar but potentially antagonistic to a comfortable current reality.

But how exactly do Personal Learning Strategies connect to crucible experiences? On one level, crucibles are quite often the catalyst not only to learning important things about leadership but also to insights about learning-about the conditions and resources in and through which learning is most likely to occur. At another level, once a person recognizes his or her Personal Learning Strategy, that strategy can guide the individual to detect the need for challenge and learning, for growth and adaptation, and for situations in which they are possible. A Personal Learning Strategy leads, perhaps inevitably, to future crucibles.

A Personal Learning Strategy can also alert one to learning opportunities that are far less special (or extreme) than the crucibles we've been describing to this point. It can enhance a person's alertness to the myriad opportunities for learning that occur in everyday life-opportunities for conscious experimentation and testing in real time. Mellon, the turnaround specialist who earlier described how panic had taught him to calm himself and others, explained it this way:

Whether I am at the podium at an investor conference, with all these razor-sharp analysts trying to reveal some hidden weakness, or in a small group with a bunch of junior people who want desperately to believe that we're going in the right direction and that somebody-anybody-has a plan they can trust, I feel Like I'm on stage and I've got to perform. I've got to project confidence even when I'm unsure. I've got to truly believe that what I am asking people to do is possible, that it's going to lead to results we want and need. I'm acting for sure-but I'm not pretending. I am walking a tightrope with all the confidence of a professional, knowing fully well that if I fall I'm in serious trouble, but never looking down. That's the work of leading.

How did Mellon get to a point where he felt confident in his ability to perform? "It takes practice," he said. "I've learned a lot from experience and reflecting on that experience."

The ability to experiment in real time is not exclusively a product of crucible experiences. It is ability, however, that seems unusually common among leaders who have had a crucible experience that caused them to reflect on their own Personal Learning Strategy. Once aware of the way they learned from experience, they saw opportunities for learning all around them. Not unlike stage actors repeating their performance of a particular play, they could be "in role;" but still able to improvise in tone or emphasis and thus to judge the reaction of the audience or their fellow actors. Not unlike martial artists Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan, who perform exquisitely complicated bodily contortions with speed and grace, these leaders are intensely aware of themselves and their surroundings even as they seem to observers to be a blur of motion. And not

unlike consummate musicians who tune themselves and their instruments in mid performance, these leaders demonstrate that they can *practice while they perform*.

Table 2-4 lists more lessons on learning extracted from interviews about crucible experiences. Notice as you read through them the very individual and yet practical quality to the lessons people gained from a wide variety of experiences.

TABLE 2-4

Lessons about learning

Crucible type	Lessons about learning*
New territory	• Don't assume anything about a situation; you'll likely be wrong if you rely on your first impression. • Leaders need to ask questions as often as they give answers. • Be aware of the lenses you bring to a situation; a leader needs to question himself or herself. • Learn to rely on others; a leader needs to be able to trust other people. When you're new to a leadership situation, find common ground by telling stories and let people to share theirs. • Sometimes events can conspire to make you a leader.
Reversal	• Leaders need to remember importance of interdependence. An organization is a community of human beings. • Leaders need to care about interpersonal relationships and be willing to be cared about. • A leader doesn't have to be superhuman or have all the answers, no matter how much people may wish it to be so. • Failing is only a step on the path to success. • Trouble doesn't last forever. • Know what you stand for as a leader before things crash around. People look for your leadership. • Integrity is the only thing you have that's truly yours.
Suspension	• It is crucial for you, as leader, to have a mission; people respond to earnestness and authenticity as much as to logic. • Leaders need to be at peace with themselves before they can ask others to be peaceful; • Leaders need to be clear about what they value if they expect others to be driven by their values. • Leaders don't need to be bulletproof and have all the answers, it helps engage others in the decision-making process. • Leaders need to roll with the punches and be ready to acknowledge when they're wrong.

These lessons were extracted from interviews.

One thing that came across during the interviews for this book is that many, if not all, of these leaders are what I call "egoless" learners. They are constantly in search of new ideas and new ways of thinking about and solving perennial problems. Like trapeze artists, they let go in order to move forward-even when they're uncertain that the swing will be there to catch hold of at the precise moment it's needed. Calling them egoless doesn't mean they don't have egos-not by a stretch. Rather, it means that they refuse to let what they know get in the way of learning new things. Morgan McCall underscored this point in his study of successful executives: "[They] took responsibility for their own learning. Instead of denying critical feedback that hurt, they swallowed their pride and took it to heart. Instead of blaming everything on an intolerable boss, they dug out messages for themselves. Instead of dismissing other people because they were too old or too young or too abrasive or too soft or too different, they adopted the attitude that you can learn something from everyone."⁷

Experiences, crucible experiences most profoundly, may provide the opportunity and the reason to learn, but, like a horse drawn to water, individuals won't learn from experience if they are not prepared to learn. Thus, a crucial precondition for mining experience for insight is awareness of what it takes to learn. To understand how people achieve this awareness and how the flywheel of learning starts to move, we must venture deeper into what goes on inside a crucible-the topic of the next chapter.

[3]

INSIDE THE CRUCIBLE

Learning and Leading with Resilience

Success is how high you bounce when you hit the bottom.

-General George S. Patton

IN HIS SHORT STORY "A Descent into the Maelstrom," Edgar Allan Poe offers a marvelous literary evocation of life inside a crucible¹ The story's narrator, one of three brothers who achieved success as fishermen by sailing through waters made treacherous by a periodic whirlpool or maelstrom, tells of a fateful day when he lost track of the time and tides and his ship was sucked into the circling waters. In the clamor and rush of water pulling the boat to the ocean floor, he confesses that he fell into the grip of an overpowering panic. In the moment of greatest confusion, however, with the sky narrowing above him, he was suddenly enveloped in an unearthly calm, a revelation that everything was beyond his control. No matter what he did, it seemed he was going to die. And in those minutes of calm, he let loose his death grip on one reality and recognized another.

The noise and the fog that had impaired his senses receded. He stepped outside the part of him that had panicked and saw with astonishing clarity that some debris caught up in the whirlpool wasn't descending as fast as his ship. In fact, some empty barrels seemed to hang suspended above him as he and the ship sank deeper and deeper. He realized that if the barrels hung there long enough, they might escape being pulled to the bottom altogether. His chance for salvation was to lash himself to a barrel and step off the ship. He did, and he survived.

Like Poe's protagonist, most people I interview recalled life inside a crucible as a time of turbulence and profound tension sometimes depressing, sometimes giddy, sometimes chaotic, sometimes all three. Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach For America, described how, as a college senior struggling to define a thesis topic, she descended into a "funk that I had never been in

before and will hopefully never be in again." She emerged out of it with the idea of a national teacher corps. Tara Church, who founded a nationwide conservation organization, told of her inner struggle as an eight-year-old when she realized that drought robbed trees of their sustenance-but that activities aimed to save water (like using disposable paper plates) consumed trees. The seeming contradiction between conservation and destruction puzzled and then terrified her as a child. Would humans have to live underground if there were no trees and water? she wondered. Out of that nightmare came an organization she formed as a child (with help from her mother) mad~ up of children who planted trees.

Leaders I spoke with also experienced their time inside the crucible as a seemingly intractable double bind. They often looked back in wonder that they survived the turmoil at all. Some spoke ruefully (and occasionally with embarrassment) about how long it took them to see and understand what they'd actually been through. But the lessons they recounted were as immediate as if they had occurred just days before.

Even when they dismissed their survival as so much luck or good fortune, each person said their crucibles invoked as well as strengthened something crucial: their adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity is all about learning-about oneself, about the world and about what it takes to adjust to, and make, change. Adaptive capacity is what makes it possible to live with the doubt that accompanies a double bind, to open up to possibilities rather than shutting down and retreating.

Defensive reactions like tensing up, on the other hand, as Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee remind us in *Resonant Leadership*, can increase vulnerability. Such reactions make it difficult to flex-to sidestep an attacker or to see an opportunity for escape, for example-and, worse yet, they dissipate energy rather than unleash it.² "Fight or flight" may be an instinct rooted in a part of the brain evolved over tens of thousands of years of survival in the wild, but the ability to learn-and to learn quickly-is an essential part of successful adaptation to the challenges of living in human society, especially in the twenty-first century.

Resilience, a central facet of adaptive capacity, makes it possible for leaders to find calm in the face of tension and to begin the search for answers. According to psychologist Frederic Flach, resilience is about resolving the tension between opposing forces: "Each period of change is necessarily stressful, for it involves conflict between a powerful force that operates to keep things exactly as they've been, and another powerful force that commands us to move forward and embrace new conditions."³ (See the box, "Resilience: Inner Strengths and Interpersonal Strengths.") the lessons people learned about learning-suggest that resilience is perhaps better understood as a process rather than an inherited trait. In other words, while resilience may be innate to some individuals, it can also be practiced much like a deliberate sequence of moves or enacted like a diagnostic routine. As I'll show in more detail later in this book, that kind of practice is vital to an individual's Personal Learning Strategy. Resilience manifested itself in different moments in leaders' crucible stories. The following examples illustrate three key moments in the process of resilience: recognizing the tension (sometimes even the pain) that accompanies a crucible, reframing the tension as something knowable and manageable, and resolving the tension constructively.⁴

Resilience: Inner Strengths and Interpersonal Strengths

Inner Strengths

Two sources of strength-internal and interpersonal-make resilience possible. ^a

- A strong, supple sense of self-esteem
- A high level of personal discipline and a sense of responsibility
- Recognition and development of one's special gifts and talents
- Creativity: open-mindedness, receptivity to new ideas, willingness to dream
- A wide range of interests
- A keen sense of humor
- High tolerance for distress
- Focus and a commitment to life
- Faith: a philosophical and spiritual framework within which personal experiences can be interpreted and understood with meaning and hope, even at life's seemingly most helpless moments

Interpersonal Strengths

- Independence of thought and action, without being unduly reluctant to rely on others
- The ability to give and take in human interactions
- A well-established network of family and friends, including one or more who serve as confidants
- The willingness and skill to let go of resentments and forgive others as well as oneself
- Proficiency in setting limits
- Healthy self-interest
- Freedom from one's own selfishness and protection against the selfishness of others
- Generosity
- The ability to easily give and receive love

a. Adapted from Frederic Flach, *Resilience: Discovering a New Strength at Times of Stress* (Long Island City, NY: Hatherleigh Press, 2004).

RECOGNIZING THE TENSION

Muriel Siebert, founder of Siebert Financial and the first woman to own a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, came to New York in the 1950s after her father died broke from three years of

illness. She marveled at the money she was making: \$12,500 a year. But after several years of work and despite distinguishing herself as the lead airlines analyst in the NYSE Analysts Society, she was refused the title of "trader" and was denied the commissions routinely due to someone who dealt in blocks of stock the way she did.

She remembers, "I was partner of a small firm, Finkel & Co., because I could not get hired by a large firm and get credit on the business. They did not have women. We just were not there. They had women as secretaries; sometimes they had an analyst or two; but we were secretaries. This was a period of time that was not nice on Wall Street." When she realized that the men in her firm were being paid twice her wages, she sent her resume to every firm downtown-but didn't get a single bite. It wasn't until the Analysts Society sent around her resume with only her initials on it (rather than her full name) that she got an interview at a major brokerage house-and she got the job.

Still, she continued to earn only a fraction of the proper commission on her sales. She recalled in vivid detail the conflict she felt between her pride at making a sale and the deep-seated inequity she experienced. "When I learned how to trade and put the blocks together, that changed everything," she said. "One day, the Madison Fund gave me a 10,000 share order. And I went to my boss, and I said, 'Isn't this great?' And he looked at me and said, 'That's shit!' We didn't have negotiated rates, so I think the commission was maybe \$4,000, but I made only \$1,600 that day. On one hand, I thought I was doing well. That was a good month's pay. On the other hand, I was being cheated. I had to decide what I was going to do about it."

Siebert thought long and hard about her double bind: the inequity of her situation was maddening, but the risk of starting her own firm and thus deftly sidestepping the game rigged against her was enormous. Not only could she fail, but she could thoroughly alienate herself from future employers who would always question her allegiance. In the end, she chose to transform the tension that might have consumed her into a resolution to create her own firm-and ultimately also to train women and minorities to be world-class performers.

Her success in setting up her own firm (a fascinating story in itself) emboldened her to take her ideas public (e.g., as superintendent of banks for the state of New York) and to create a high school curriculum to teach teenagers about money, focused on budgeting and prudent use of credit.⁵ "Do you know there is nowhere, on any credit card bill, that says if you make only the minimum payment you will be paying for last night's dinner for fifteen to twenty years? That's the way it's designed," Siebert said. Her goal is to make sure that young people understand all the ins and outs of money and financial well-being, and she hopes to make the course mandatory for high school graduation. Siebert also launched one of the first Web sites dedicated to women and finance.

For leaders like Siebert and others I interviewed, recognizing the tension inside a crucible situation was often not easy. It requires one to distinguish between the force that is driving for change and the force that is trying desperately to sustain the status quo. It requires an awareness of one's vulnerability (difficult things are happening *to me*), and yet it demands a relentless sense of agency (*I can* do something in, or despite, these circumstances). The next step, then, involves taking that recognition and reframing or reshaping it into a new perception of reality.

REFRAMING THE TENSION

Growing up in the African American community on Baltimore's West Side, Brian Morris recalled being "not the poorest of the poor, but clearly not the richest of the rich." Truth is, his family just scraped by. Close friends and relatives were claimed as victims of drugs and gang violence. But because of some strong adult models, including a grandmother with high aspirations for young Brian, Morris was able to reshape that early adversity into opportunity: today he heads his own community-based building and investment company and he serves on the Baltimore city school board.

Asked to recall a time when he learned something important about being a leader, Morris talked about an incident at age eleven that "shaped who I am and why I behave the way I do. "His story centered on what for many children is the ultimate nightmare: he found his father lying face down on the apartment floor, unconscious from an apparent drug overdose. Morris called his mother, who summoned an ambulance, but as he recalled, "It seemed like hours, me standing there just staring at him. I don't know if I ever blinked the whole time."

The tension confronting Morris-between life and death, between life as he'd known it with a family and the specter of losing his father, between his grandmother's aspirations for him and his everyday experience of the West Side's mean streets-came at him like a freight train. "When you're young, you don't have a sense of your own existence," he said. "You don't have a sense that one day this thing ends. And not until that point did I have an understanding that this thing called my life, or this thing called the life of other people, could actually end." He began then and there to feel his own mortality, that he only had a certain amount of time allotted to him-a lesson that typically happens to people much later in life.

With that crucible experience came the realization that he wanted to make something of his limited time on earth, helping Morris to reframe his circumstances as he moved through adolescence into manhood. Describing himself as a "glass half-full kind of guy," he influenced his friends too. When his pals complained about the lack of basketball hoops in the neighborhood, he got their help to nail up milk crates. When they needed jerseys, he scavenged T-shirts and lettered them by hand.

Morris modeled himself on several heroes, Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy among them. But Malcolm X came the closest to being a kindred spirit. "Malcolm X came from nothing," Morris said. "He was a criminal, a burglar, a pimp, a drug dealer and then made this miraculous metamorphosis into this guy who led a nation in understanding themselves, understanding how to clean yourself up from whatever vices that you have and be a stand up guy who can be respected." Clearly, Morris took that understanding to heart, given his own transformation from that boy staring at his father laying on the floor to the leading Baltimore citizen and community member he later became.

Sometimes the process of reframing becomes a communal activity. Many of the leaders whose crucibles involved reversal bankruptcy, loss of an election, or a major project failure-worked their way out of an untenable situation by enlisting the aid of others facing similar straits. A marvelous example can be found in the Island Moving Company, a contemporary ballet

company based in Newport, Rhode Island, and founded by Miki Ohlsen. Classically trained in the Netherlands, Ohlsen experienced a deep and abiding love for ballet since her earliest days as a dancer. As she progressed in her training, however, earning more prominent roles and artistic acclaim, she also experienced what she termed the "brutal hierarchy" of the traditional ballet company, with the harsh and "ego-crushing" domination of the ballet master and the mindless subservience expected of even the most accomplished dancers.

Determined to pursue her passion for dance in an environment more consistent with personal expression, Ohlsen assembled a small but like-minded group of dancers into a company dedicated, in the words of its mission statement, "to the belief that *collaboration and a supportive environment* enhance the creative process, producing great works of art representing profound expressions of the human spirit and experience."⁶ The Island Moving Company, now more than twenty-five years old, has done what few regional dance organizations have done: established a permanent home, maintained a continuous schedule of performances over two decades, successfully recruited and retained a stable cast of dancers, and offered a living salary to all members of the company.

Reshaping and reframing tension is not illusion-or self-delusion. It is a purposive reframing: finding an angle or a lens through which the current reality can be reshaped into a healthier and more productive outcome. In Ohlsen's case, a principal tenet of the Island Moving Company is personal responsibility, which includes the responsibility to articulate one's own values and aspirations and to find ways to productively resolve the conflicts that will inevitably result. When, for example, individual dancers feel that they have been relegated too often to supporting roles, and they desire to be out in front, it is their obligation to say so, even if that means an uncomfortable confrontation with the artistic director or other dancers.

RESOLVING THE TENSION CONSTRUCTIVELY

Resolving the tension of any crucible experience means finding a way to mend the tear that has occurred between life as one has known it and life as it now presents itself. George Vaillant, in his long-term studies of a cohort of men, concluded that the core attribute of mental health is the ability to adapt and adjust.⁷ He identified some eighteen forms of adaptation-what he referred to as defense mechanisms-and argued that five were characteristic of healthy, mature means by which people cope with the challenges that life presents: altruism, humor, suppression, anticipation and sublimation. I found ample evidence for each in the stories I heard about learning from crucible experiences.

For example, Bob Donohue, who leads the Fire and Rescue Department for the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport), which includes Boston's Logan International Airport, spoke of the challenges of leading in a complex, interdependent environment. The emergencies that are so much a part of his department's mission do not respect organizational boundaries. But there are emergencies and then there are frame-busting events that toss convention out the window. On September 11, 2001, when two commercial airliners out of Logan were hijacked and sent hurtling into the World Trade Center in New York City, Donohue was one of a very few people who understood just how complicated the task would be of coordinating several dozen

local, municipal, airport, state, and federal agencies and nearly as many businesses in their response to this unprecedented crisis.

"As the news began to filter in I was stunned, absolutely stunned," he recalled. "How could anyone do this? Why would they do it? And then: what are we going to do?" Fortunately, his department had a set of agreements and rules about how to behave in an emergency-even if none were truly matched to the scale of that one. "But even more important, we had a network of people I knew well. It was a bad situation, but I knew I could trust these people to do the right things when they were called on to do them."

Donohue called on his network that day in ways he never imagined he'd have to, and like the unanticipated leaders who emerged in the days following the devastation-particularly mid-level managers in the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey-they kept order at the airport; coordinated operations to accommodate dozens of grounded aircraft, flight crews, and thousands of passengers; mobilized staff to meet and console the families of the hijacking victims; and began a methodical search for clues to the events of the day.

What did a crucible experience like 9/11 teach Donohue about himself as a leader and his own learning style? He replied that though he did gain some confidence in himself as a leader, the real resolution from this crucible event for him came when he realized he'd become more willing to ask for help from others.

Donohue makes a powerful point: awareness of tension or the demand for adaptation is an empty vessel if you are not disposed to learn from it. Seeing others act or, in this instance, seeking out others to lend assistance is something that individuals can learn to do. In other words, resilience is not an accident of birth. It can be learned.

A resolution to the tension is not always the product of conscious deliberation. Once in a while it seems to happen spontaneously, as Jack Coleman, former president of Haverford College in Pennsylvania, suggests in a crucible story he chose to share. Coleman described how one day, during the Vietnam War, he heard that a group of students was planning to pull down the American flag and burn it. He also knew that members of the school's football team were determined that the protesters would not succeed. As both factions gathered around the flagpole, Coleman suddenly had an idea to preempt the showdown. With a voice quavering with the depth of emotion the experience still held for him, he explained, "From somewhere-a voice came to me, gave me a message. And I went to the peace faction and said, 'Instead of burning the flag, why not get a bucket of soap and water? Wash the flag and put it back up.' That's what happened. The troops dispersed. I don't know where that message came from or why."

Whether spontaneous or the product of a prepared mind, resolutions of the sort Coleman and Donohue described are the work of leaders. But success at resolving tension does not always take place on the stage of world events, of course. As they say, sometimes healing the universe is an inside job. Certainly that would be the case with the leaders I encountered who overcame learning disabilities through creative adaptations.

For example, Virgin Group founder Richard Branson suffers from dyslexia, is bad at math and, by his own admission, has a terrible memory. He never made it through high school but, he says, "At some point, I think I decided that being dyslexic was better than being stupid."⁸ Knowing how he learns-and learns best-he set about creating things he could be proud of, leveraging lessons learned in one product or service to grow another and another (forty-nine at last count).

The list of business leaders with learning disabilities is formidable-and I mention it here because it seems imminently appropriate in a discussion about learning. They include business leaders John Chambers (CEO of Cisco Systems), Charles Schwab, John Reed (formerly of Citibank), Craig McCaw (who pioneered the cellular industry), Paul Orfalea (founder of Kinko's), Diane Swonk (chief economist of Bank One), and attorney David Boies. Orfalea failed second grade and spent part of third in a class of mentally retarded children. He could not read. As his peers read aloud in class, Orfalea described it as if "angels whispered words in their ears." Each in his or her own way resolved the conflict between a learning disability that threatened to sideline them at an early age and an overpowering urge to succeed.⁹

Resolution can be accomplished by shifting the focus from a disability to an ability to confront and overcome challenges. Finding a way to cope with dyslexia or navigate a path to normalcy after September 11 does not necessarily mean the underlying tension has been eradicated. It has, however, been rendered manageable. And importantly, finding resolution is almost never done in complete isolation.

No One Learns Alone

The journey that transforms an individual into a leader is often a lonely one. We only truly know one side of any conversation: our own. We know every torturous turn and pang of our own ordeals and rites of passage, but we never know more than a cartoon version of anyone else's. Unable to hear another's interior monologue, you may not realize that he or she is struggling at all.

Yet, the leaders I interviewed were rarely alone in their crucibles. Mentors, coaches, teachers, spouses, peers, bosses, and friends played critical advisory or "sense-making" roles during crucible experiences. They helped most by putting events in context, in helping others create a more robust awareness of the things that were going on around them. As Vaillant concluded in his study of lifelong adaptation, "Both as children and as adults, we learn to anticipate pain effectively only if someone first sits beside us while we learn to bear current anxiety."¹⁰

For example, and as I will show in detail in the next chapter, outstanding performers often seek out the best available teachers even when, to the rest of us, it appears that they are at the peak of their game or their profession. A great coach or mentor can contribute a wealth of experience and an objective eye. The same finding applies to effective leaders, especially because of the central role that experience plays in their matriculation and their maturation.

Consider the case of the 1970s congressman and priest, Father Robert Drinan. He was the first member of the House to file a resolution of impeachment on President Nixon (on July 31, 1973). Although by that point he was a seasoned religious and political leader, he told me that during this particular crucible experience, he leaned heavily on a network of Jesuit peers and moral leaders to convince him that he was doing the right thing by publicly accusing the president of the United States of illegal acts. The community of Jesuits with whom he lived in Washington, D.C., many of whom were on the faculty at Georgetown University, provided a critical sounding board.

For leaders in the midst of a crucible, one of the most important things that their coaches and mentors did was to help them to "step out of role" temporarily, to accomplish what management educator Janice Klein argues is a vital skill for leaders and change agents: the ability to be both an insider and an outsider.¹¹ The insider is entirely in the game, in the action as it unfolds, but the outsider looks around, questions what is being taken for granted, and assesses his or her own performance from a more dispassionate perspective. In crucible situations, coaching tends to be more effective than mentoring: unlike mentors, coaches do not offer answers, they offer perspective.

Coaches and mentors rarely just appeared-as if by magic or destiny-though that would have lent a more dramatic flair to some of the crucible stories. More often, coaches and mentors were recruited as part of a strategy for managing and/or resolving the tension induced by a crucible situation. Family members, most commonly parents and grandparents, tended to be more easily at hand, and in many instances they were more attractive because they'd already proved themselves to be understanding and accepting of the individual and his or her prior quandaries.

Some leaders enlarged the role of coach by impaneling for themselves the equivalent of a personal board of directors whom they call on periodically for advice, feedback, and perspective. Amazon.com's Jeff Wilke has done just that. As a result of a crucible early in his career (described in chapter 2), Wilke said he recognized the value of having a group of people-friends, former bosses, and teachers-to whom he could refer for advice and counsel and who, in turn, cared enough about him and his success to tell him the unvarnished truth.

What distinguishes learning from a crucible and simply surviving it (or, worse yet, not surviving it) is partly a product of personality and partly a product of learned behavior. Some people are constitutionally optimistic. The roots of their resilience go deep so deep, in fact, that beyond a certain point, a search for origins becomes a purely metaphysical exercise.

The crucible stories in these last two chapters, however, offer strong evidence that both helplessness and resilience can be learned.¹² Repeatedly, people attributed to their crucible experiences an enriched understanding of how they lead, and then use that understanding, in the words of one, to put themselves in the path of more crucibles"-so that they could continue to learn, adapt, and improve.

That's why, for example, I found these leaders to be resolute in their curiosity, what I refer to as their proclivity to be egoless learners. To a person, they denied suffering from

boredom, whether on the job or in the rest of life. There is always something new to explore: a new technique, a colleague's or an employee's new idea, a new way to look at an old problem. Each challenge refines, sharpens, and/or improves understanding of the world and of the self and, in many instances, enhances appreciation of the fact that there is still so much more to learn. Practice makes perfect-and as I'll show in the next chapter, it can even overcome any perceived limits in the talent department.