

# Your Finest Hour Is Now

## Lessons in Leadership

A leader's guide to improve yourself, inspire others,  
and achieve better results

*By* STEVE MATTIOLI

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# Preface

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I began writing this book over five years ago. My goal is to pass along the lessons I learned during my career that will help you become a better leader. I've always had the ability to take complex topics and make them easy to understand. For example, one of my roles in my previous job was taking federal regulations and making them easier for the public to comprehend and comply with. I use that same skill in this book to tackle the topics that help leaders succeed.

I've been in a leadership role for most of my adult life, encompassing over thirty years. During that time, I acquired knowledge and skills that helped me succeed as a leader. I've been consistently promoted and earned awards for my leadership ability. I've seen what it takes to get promoted and grow as a leader. Unfortunately, I've also seen what can hinder leaders and hold them back from their full potential. I'm now ready to share that knowledge with you.

I wrote this book about leadership to be helpful, fun to read, and easy to understand. This book will show you the principles and techniques that lead to successful outcomes. You will learn how to improve yourself, build employee loyalty, avoid common pitfalls, navigate tricky situations, and apply time-tested wisdom for better results. My goal in writing this book was to help you become a better, more impactful leader. You will be better prepared to lead after reading this book because each topic I cover comes from hands-on experience, with actual employees, in real situations.

Before we begin, let me tell you a little about my background. I served thirty-five years with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), an agency of the U.S. Department of Transportation. I spent most of that time as a supervisor and leader, holding critical positions for most of my career. I served in several locations with the organization, including North Carolina, Ohio, Illinois, and California. My last assignment was as the supervisor in charge of the California division, the 2nd largest in the agency.

Before joining the federal government, I was employed in the trucking industry and served four years in the United States Marine Corps Reserves. I earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Akron and was a licensed private pilot. I live in Folsom, California, with my wife, Dottie, and pet dog, Ace.

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In this book, references to the time I worked for the FMCSA will be abbreviated as “government” or “my agency.”

### Name changes

While the names of individuals I worked with, for privacy, were changed, the dialogue and events occurred as described.

# Introduction

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I'll never forget that morning in January 1992. I was so excited to go to work. It was one of those days when you can't wait to get up and get started. This was a big day for me; I had been promoted to my first supervisory position after four and a half years of hard work, and I was beginning my new job in a brand-new city. As I drove to my new office in the early morning hours, I saw the tall, glittering buildings of downtown Columbus, Ohio, come into view. *Wow*, I thought to myself, *this is it. I've finally arrived*. I couldn't contain my excitement. This was my first promotion, the first step on my ladder of success. I took it all in as I drove downtown—the city, the lights, the morning so full of possibilities—and before I knew it, I was standing in front of the office entrance, taking a deep breath and opening the door to a new chapter in my career.

I was greeted by a friendly receptionist who gave me a whirlwind tour of the office and led me down a narrow office hallway, where she introduced me to my new boss. He was a tough-looking, tall, older man with neatly combed-back grey hair who had spent twenty years as a state trooper with the Ohio State Highway Patrol. In the 1960s, it was said that he led a group of officers that went into a prison during a riot to take back control of the facility. Yeah, this guy was as tough as they come. He welcomed me in and introduced me to the other employees, lots of new names and faces that I frantically tried to remember

through my first-day nerves. I could tell everyone was sizing me up, trying to determine whether I would be great or awful to work with from the quick handshakes and polite greetings. I couldn't blame them. We both knew how much control I would have over their professional lives in the future. Everything was about to change, yet nobody knew what to expect from me.

As I settled into my new office, the gravity of the situation finally hit me. Yes, I had done the jobs of those I was about to supervise. And yes, I had proven myself to be capable in their field. I deserved this promotion over all of the others who applied for it. I had the knowledge, skills, and motivation to do the job well. *I'm ready for this*, I told myself. *At least I think I am*. In the Navy, sailors call the ship's wheel the conn, and that morning, I felt like I was taking control of the conn of a vast ship, the success—or failure—of which I would now be held accountable. This was the promotion I had been waiting for, and it was time to show everyone what I was capable of. I was excited—and scared.

In the few quiet moments of that first day on the job, the weight of my new responsibilities hit me—hard. I began to think of all of the critical decisions I now had to make. *Will I embarrass myself or the agency? Am I ready for this? Will the employees accept me? Do I even know how to lead them? What if I mess up?*

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If you're anything like me, those same fears and doubts have gone through your mind when taking on a new and vital leadership role. These are common feelings. Everyone has high expectations of you, and your every move is carefully watched and frequently scrutinized. Over the years, I've learned that feelings of both courage and fear come with promotions. Courage is looking at your past and knowing that you can do whatever you set your mind to. Looking back at your past accomplishments gives you the confidence to accomplish bigger and better things. This is confidence in yourself and your abilities. But fear? Fear of failure? That's not supposed to be there.

Failure was on my mind on that first day of my promotion. Up until this point in my career, I had been responsible for one and only one person—me. Now I would be responsible for many. Whereas before, I only had to make sure my work was exemplary, now I had to make sure everyone's work was good. Whereas before, I only had to achieve my own goals, now I would be responsible for the goals of an entire office. *At least my boss will train me on what to do*, I told myself. Wrong. "I'm so sick of running these employees," he said as he showed me piles of meticulously kept, handwritten records and lists of every aspect of the program and the employees. I tried to hide my shock. *No computer? What is this, the Middle Ages?* "Make it work, Steve," he told me.

And with that, my leadership career in the United States Federal Government began.<sup>1</sup> Over the next three decades, I would be leading in more prominent and challenging roles with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). I would become the leader—the division administrator—of the FMCSA’s Ohio Division office and be promoted to lead two other Division Offices in Illinois and California. I’ve received some of the highest recognitions from my agency, including being named a co-chair of a national workgroup that revised the agency’s entire enforcement process. And it all started in that little office in Columbus, Ohio.

Before my time in the U.S. Government, I served in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves. I joined the U.S. Marine Corps when I was eighteen years old and spent four years in a reserve infantry unit. Starting as a rifleman, I worked my way up to become a fire team leader, a platoon radio operator, and a rifle squad leader, eventually achieving the rank of Corporal. When I graduated from Marine Corps boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina, one of the commanding officers gave my platoon somewhat of a commencement address. He told us that someday the success or failure of a mission might come down to just one Marine. One. And the Marine Corps had trained us with the knowledge, skills, and stamina to be that one Marine. All of our training,

<sup>1</sup> Federal Highway Administration and Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

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days full of physical exertion were to ensure that each of us would succeed if we were that one Marine. And you may be that one person with whom success or failure—of your company, your office, your team, or your business—rests. My goal is to provide you with the information you need to succeed.

My thirty-plus years of leadership have taught me how to engage with employees, communicate effectively, and accomplish personal and professional goals. I've learned how to lead diverse groups of people and, in turn, how to be led by them. I've learned how to earn the respect of others and how important it is to show others respect in return. I've learned how to be tough and how to be kind, how to win, how to discipline and praise, how to be patient, and how to manage priorities. I've also had my fair share of failures and stumbles along the way. Leadership is a skill that must be continually worked on because one never arrives at perfection. It's a continuous learning process.

Leadership is vitally important to the success of any organization. A leader makes the difference between success and failure. A leader mobilizes others to produce much greater results than the sum of their parts. A leader changes things for the better. One good leader is all it takes to change the course of history. A leader overcomes where others fail. When others are pessimistic, a leader is confident; when others are downcast, a leader encourag-

es. When others can't see a way forward, a leader finds a path. A leader cares for the people they lead. A country, an army, a company, or a small business all need strong, effective leaders. Wherever you may work, you need to be that leader. And this book will help you be that leader.

When people think of leaders today, they think of presidents of the United States, such as Abraham Lincoln, or the CEOs of incredibly successful companies, like Steve Jobs of Apple, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, or Elon Musk of Tesla. These are great leaders in their respective fields, and there is much that we can learn from them. But these examples are just one aspect of leadership. There are thousands of employees working behind the scenes to ensure that day-to-day operations run smoothly within these companies and organizations. From policy advisors, software engineers, and floor supervisors to content editors and human resource officers, these leaders would not be successful without the thousands of other leaders working on the front lines leading employees every day and achieving results.

It takes more than a CEO to run a company. Regardless of what their title may be, every leader is crucial to a company's bottom line. In my leadership career, I've learned that the employees in the lower leadership positions are the most critical to an organization's success. Not only do these employees control tremendous amounts of resources, but their efforts motivate and guide those who directly

impact clients and customers. These are the unsung heroes. Without them, big companies couldn't thrive. You may not be leading a country through tumultuous times, leading an army in battle, or serving as the CEO of a large corporation, but your success as a leader is just as critical whether you realize it or not. The time and effort you invest into your supervisory skills greatly impact your organization; in fact, its success or failure can hinge on your ability to lead.

Leadership isn't complicated, but it certainly isn't easy. It may be easy to boss people around, but it takes skill to lead others successfully. It's only by leading others that one can accomplish great results. Cultivating a successful team can release exponential results that wouldn't be possible by yourself. If you are currently in a leadership position or plan to be, this book is your guide to becoming a successful and effective leader. No matter your background, you too can have a successful career leading others. Throughout this book, I'll show you the principles and skills you need to be a well-respected and impactful leader. It doesn't matter what career stage you're in, which industry you work in, or what kind of job you have:

If you lead others in any capacity, whether you're a first-time supervisor or a seasoned leader, this book is for you. I'll show you how to avoid common mistakes and keep improving in your pursuit of becoming a better leader.

If you're a small business owner, this book is for you. I'll teach you how to lead your employees effectively so you can spend more time focused on running your business.

If you're stressed out and having a tough time leading others, this book is for you. I'll explain how you can reduce your stress levels and positively deal with people.

If you're not yet in a leadership position but you want to be, this book is definitely for you. It will give you a huge advantage as you progress toward becoming a leader and will prepare you to take the lead when an opportunity presents itself.

You have what it takes to be a great leader, one who inspires confidence in others and achieves whatever you set your mind to. Are you ready to lead? Are you ready to move forward? Buckle up, and let's get started. We're going to start with something really simple—and you've known it all along. Before We Begin...

# Chapter 1

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## TAKE A SELFIE

### Lessons in Self-Awareness

**W**hat do you see when you take a selfie? Obviously, you see yourself, but what else do you see? What else *should* you see? I've always been amused that the person I see in the mirror does not look exactly like the one I see when I take a selfie on my phone. Somehow it's a bit different. I'm more critical of a selfie than the person I see in the mirror because I notice more things about myself. I can take pictures from different angles to see myself in ways I usually can't. I can zoom in and get real close to see the flaws in my skin or how thin my hair really is, or how genuine my smile looks. I can change the lighting or the background through my phone's seemingly endless photo settings.

A selfie exposes me somewhat differently than a mirror does. It helps me spot visual flaws that I don't usually notice. It allows me to see myself precisely as others see me, and sometimes I don't like what it shows. Sometimes I can't believe I look like that! Thank goodness for the delete button.

Leadership is a lot like taking a selfie. I know that might sound crazy, but let me explain. You have your personal mirror, which makes you look pretty good. But under

different angles, different lighting, and different situations, you may not look as good as you think you do. You may not be as good as you think. This is how the world really sees you. Everybody can see your flaws—even if you can't. Others see you from a multitude of angles, some that you are blind to.

And just like an actual selfie, some flaws are fixable, and some aren't. I can't fix the fact that I hardly have any hair on my head despite what the magic potions sold on TV promise. But once I know this and accept it as a fact, I can still look great as I deal with reality. I dress professionally and keep a tight shave on my hair so I look my best, and I have a positive attitude that exudes confidence. I compensate for the issues I see in my selfie, even if I can't change them.

*“You have your personal mirror, which makes you look pretty good. But under different angles, different lighting, and different situations, you may not look as good as you think you do. You may not be as good as you think”*

To be a great leader, you need to take a selfie—an *accurate* self-assessment. I want to emphasize the word *accurate*. You will only be able to improve as a leader when you look at yourself with complete honesty. We fool ourselves all the time into believing things about us that aren't

true. It's that posed look you see in the mirror versus an unflattering selfie angle. Unless we deal with an accurate assessment of our strengths and weaknesses, we'll never become great leaders.

It's crucial that you know your flaws and strengths and which habits or attitudes you always default to. Imagine that you need to cross a river, and you're examining a boat that could help you get to the other side. You need to make sure the boat has no holes, especially below the waterline, where water could pour in. As you examine the boat, you find a small hole. What do you do at this point? Do you toss the boat aside and try to find a new one? Maybe, if you had the time and money for a new one, but this is your only option. So you say to yourself, *You know what? I'll just patch the hole and keep an eye on it so it doesn't leak.* The small hole in the boat doesn't make the entire boat useless. It can be repaired so the boat can function properly. And if the first patch doesn't work, there are always other types of patches out there that will get the job done. But if you ignore this flaw and attempt to cross the river, the boat and your life could be in serious jeopardy.

Here's a simple fact about all leaders—they all have holes in their boats. Nobody is a perfect leader, and nobody has all of the right talents to lead. If you could imagine leaders as boats, they would all have a bunch of patched-up holes in them, and some of them would be patched up multiple times. The idea of a perfect leader is

a myth. Every leader has flaws that make them imperfect at what they do. You have them, and so do I. Steve Jobs of Apple had them, and so did Bill Gates of Microsoft and Jeff Bezos of Amazon. Steve Jobs was known as one of the brightest creative geniuses of his time, yet he struggled with his anger, arrogance, and relationships with employees. It cost him dearly. He nearly lost his career and his company because of it. Every great leader has a similar story to tell. Yet each one has learned how to overcome their flaws to become the best leaders they can be.

Some flaws are internal; they are a part of who we are. One of my biggest internal flaws is that I am reserved. You don't have to ask me to be quiet; I already am. It's my nature, my default setting. When I'm in a room with a lot of people, I don't talk much. And I usually don't speak up in group settings. I prefer to observe everything and listen to everyone in the background. Being reserved is not a sin, and it's certainly not a crime. Some even say it's a good trait to have. As they say, you are who you are. Since I've been this way since birth, why fix it? Well, eventually, I found out that being reserved is not always compatible with outstanding leadership. I still received promotions from my superiors since I worked hard and was good at what I did. But the more I stayed in my comfort zone of being quiet, the more it became a blind spot for me. It held me back from bigger opportunities.

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Then along came my new boss, D. D made things happen. He was outgoing, smart, well-liked, and had the ear of top leadership. He always found a way to lead his employees through difficult situations. One sign of a great leader is that they help others become great leaders. D noticed how my silence held me back from opportunities that would advance my career. He knew that I couldn't become a better leader without addressing the blind spot my naturally quiet demeanor had become. D and I were at a meeting together when he pulled me aside and said he wanted to speak with me. What he told me changed the trajectory of my career. "Steve, you need to speak up in these meetings. People respect you, and they need to hear what you have to say." The second he said those words, I knew he was exactly right. I had to overcome my shyness and speak.

And I did. I was later appointed as a co-chair of a national working group to re-engineer the agency's enforcement program. The team I led developed a better performance-based process that completely changed how the agency assessed risk and assigned resources. That system is still in use today. I was placed on a team that helped institute an electronic document management system for the agency. That system is still in use today, too. I received promotions to the division administrator positions in Illinois and later in California. I received recognition for my efforts at national award ceremonies from my agency and the Department of Transportation. I received dozens

of superior ratings that highlighted my accomplishments and rewarded me financially. I became a great public presenter and gave many presentations to the trucking industry, the public, state officials, leadership, and colleagues in my agency. In summary, I overcame my internal flaw and succeeded beyond my dreams. Overcoming opened up a world of possibilities for me.

*“In summary, I overcame my internal flaw and succeeded beyond my dreams. Overcoming opened up a world of possibilities for me. “*

Now wait a minute, you might be saying. A few paragraphs ago, you said you were still quiet! I am. But I have learned how to put this aside when I'm at work. And it wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be. All I had to do was be willing to change, and I did. I am still reserved and always will be, but I have learned how to manage it in professional settings to be the best leader I can be. Just like the hole in the boat that needs to be patched before it can successfully cross a river, I've fixed this, and I keep an eye on it. I adjust when I see that I may be leaning back into my quiet nature too much.

To be a great leader, you need to know your internal flaws. Challenge yourself to be brutally honest. What are your innate personality traits, and how do these traits interact with others? What is your default setting? Are you a

people person or quiet like me? These are essential questions to ask yourself as you begin your leadership journey. Your style—the real you—is the starting point, but you may need to work on some aspects here and there and overcome your weaknesses to become the leader you want to be.

While some flaws—like my reservedness are internal, others are external. Maybe you are not the best writer or presenter. Perhaps you don't have the analytical skills you need to track progress on your goals or to tackle a big project at work. These flaws are not who you are, but they are nonetheless holes in your boat that can prevent you from reaching your full potential. Often all you need to overcome these external flaws is more education, technical skills, or training in a particular subject. For many years I devoted time each week to read up on various topics to help me in my job. If I felt like I was falling behind in communicating effectively or managing my priorities, I would consult books, online articles, and reference materials to sharpen my sword. When I needed more technical knowledge about self-driving vehicles and their potential effect on my work with the trucking industry, I studied and learned about the Global Positioning System and how it worked. I did these things because I identified deficiencies in my job knowledge that I knew I had to address to succeed.

You have a leadership flaw that's hindering you from achieving your best results. It could be that you are too loud and don't listen to others enough. It might be arrogance, impatience, or lack of communication skills. Whatever your flaw is, you must first spend time identifying it and then take steps to correct it. If you need stronger writing skills, read up on the elements of business writing. If you lack effective public-speaking skills, practice more or take a class. If your flaw is part of your personality, learn how to make it work for you and not against you. If you are generally loud and outgoing, practice being quiet and listening to others more. If you usually are quiet and shy like I am, practice being more talkative and outgoing. Overcoming your weaknesses is a critical piece of the foundation you need to lead effectively. Don't blow by this quickly. Take your time and commit to the process.

I've heard people say countless times, "Well, this is just who I am, and I can't change." What they are really saying is that they don't want to change. Throughout my career, I've noticed that those who don't address their obvious flaws eventually hit a brick wall. It reduces their ability to progress further in their career. They die on the vine. And then that flaw presents itself during a big presentation or in front of senior staff, and they are permanently scarred by it.

If you want to be an effective leader and reach your full potential, you have no choice—you must fix the holes

in your boat. Addressing your flaws—internal or external—is more a matter of will than ability. You have what it takes to overcome your flaws. All you have to do now is “take a selfie,” an accurate self-assessment of yourself that will help you locate and address the shortcomings that others around you already see.

Many products on the market will help you do this. Tools such as 360-degree feedback assessments can provide you with valuable input from your peers, co-workers, and managers. Other tools, such as the Myers-Briggs Personality Test, assess your personality type and help you understand more about who you are and how you approach decisions. Similarly, the University of Southern California’s Leadership Style Self-Assessment tool helps you understand your leadership style and how it impacts your performance in the office. The Institute for Health and Human Potential provides an Emotional Intelligence Assessment that helps you determine how your ability to perceive emotions affects your ability to manage others in the workplace. These are just a tiny sample of the wide variety of tools available to you as a leader.

Years ago, a friend named Frank took a 360-degree feedback survey with his employees and was shocked by the results. He discovered that some of them didn’t think he was an effective communicator. He had supervised these employees for quite some time and thought he had a great working relationship with all of them. Weeks

later, he was still stunned and upset that his employees had somehow betrayed him. He didn't see the flaws in his communication skills, but everyone else around him did. The survey results were an eye-opener for him and helped him address a weakness he never knew he had.

You may be upset with the results of your self-assessment. It hurts when others point out a flaw you didn't think you had. It's easy to react with anger and shock as my friend did, but remember that your peers, coworkers, and supervisors are only trying to help you. The holes they point out to you will sink your boat if you don't fix them. Someday you will thank them for helping you keep your boat afloat. Thank goodness for those around us who are honest enough to share feedback in a positive way! While it may hurt at first, this is a necessary step in the process, and you will see the value of it as long as you keep a positive attitude.

If these assessment tools do not fit your situation or finances, then good old-fashioned talking with friends, colleagues, and others who know you well is the best option. As good and helpful as these assessment tools can be, my best insights came from people I worked with, like my old boss, D. My coworkers knew my flaws and were kind enough to share them with me in positive, uplifting ways. I always prefer this improvement method and have personally grown more from it than any other assessment

tool. Like D, I provide my feedback to other leaders so they can learn and advance in their professional development.

*“If these assessment tools do not fit your situation or finances, then good old-fashioned talking with friends, colleagues, and others who know you well is the best option.”*

Don't be afraid to confront your internal and external flaws head-on. It's the only way you will become a better leader and help those around you achieve great results. Critically assess the information others provide you with an open mind that is always looking for ways to improve. Above all else, make a habit of evaluating your skills routinely. This isn't something you can do once and be done with. You may have fixed the holes in your boat years ago, but more may have developed in your blind spot. Keep on the lookout for them, keep fixing them, and keep taking your selfies.

## Chapter 1

### Lessons in Self-Awareness

#### Key takeaway and applied knowledge

**Take it Further:** Discuss the chapter with a friend or colleague and get their perspective on your selfie. Identify one area that you can improve upon and then take a step to address it.