

# Learning From Life

## How to use life lessons to enhance leadership skills.

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THE DIVIDE between our work and private lives is a common theme in business literature, with vivid descriptions of the “tug of war” that many of us experience as we try to balance the many roles we play.

But are there really benefits to be realized from this juggling act? Can your role as a spouse, parent, friend, or community volunteer actually enhance your success at work?

We all have our limits, and taking on too much can become stressful. But research conducted at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) with practicing managers suggests that the roles we play in our private lives can greatly enhance both our personal well-being and our effectiveness in the workplace. If you are able to view the divide between your work and private life not as a conflict but as a channel, you will find that each side of your life is filled with experiences that will enrich and enliven the other. And as a result, you will open yourself up to remarkable possibilities for growth and development.

### Developing interpersonal skills

There are many opportunities to learn the interpersonal skills you need for workplace success from the roles you play in your private life. For example:

*Susan and Lawrence were co-chairs for a charity event for a local mental health organization. Susan is a good strategic thinker and excels at motivating volunteers. Lawrence has a degree of determination and persistence that Susan lacks. Initially, Lawrence felt impatient with Susan's consideration of “what ifs” and with her insistence that volunteers be included in the planning process. Susan, in turn, thought Lawrence was a control freak who didn't value other people's ideas. During the six months they work-ed together, their con-*

*flicts readily surfaced. They both, however, had a strong commitment to success that helped them discuss their differences. They came to realize that together they had a combination of strengths for designing and managing a complex project that was stronger than what either of them possessed individually.*

A community volunteer experience where you partner with others can give you a deeper appreciation of those who have a different approach to life. In turn, this sensitivity can make you more effective on the job when you work with those whose personalities, perspectives, and working styles are different from your own.

Family and friendship roles can also teach important leadership lessons. You can learn how to develop others, how to negotiate, and how to resolve conflicts. Parenting, loving relationships, friendships, and in-law relationships can teach valuable skills.

### Handling multiple tasks

We all know that multitasking is a fact of life in today's business world. We are asked to do more—and to do it in less time. It's not always easy to learn effective multitasking skills, while keeping up such a fast pace, as evidenced by the example below.

*When Corine decided to go back to work after the birth of her twins, she had doubts about her ability to be effective as both a manager and a mother. She often felt overwhelmed when she anticipated the increased responsibilities she knew she would face each day. But, over time Corine became a better manager. Taking care of the twins made her far more comfortable in juggling the multiple assignments she faced each day at work.*

When you have extra responsibilities at home, you sharpen your skills in setting priorities, managing your time, and delegating tasks. You can learn how and where to find resources that sup-

port you in effectively meeting your challenges. You might have to enlist the help of other family members, friends, or even paid help, but as you gain experience in clarifying priorities and handling competing demands in your personal life, you'll find you've developed the very tactics you need to improve your competency as a workplace leader who can move projects forward.

### Leveraging background experiences

Sometimes a work challenge calls for experiences that are well beyond anything you'll find in a typical job description. As evidenced in the example below, a unique skill or personal knowledge of a product, industry, or customer can prove invaluable to your organization.

*Tina's father worked for the State Department, so she lived in several different countries as a child. She endured changing schools, leaving friends, and learning new customs and languages. As an adult, Tina discovered her past provided her with the unique skills her company needed to develop a new global strategy. She understood the importance of cultural differences, had a working knowledge of several languages, and had learned to be adaptable. As a result, Tina was selected to be part of her company's “advance team” when new offices were opened overseas.*

As you move forward in your career, remember the wealth of experiences you've accumulated at varying stages of your life. Rather than tucking them away and moving on, bring relevant pieces of your background to the forefront to help you build your leadership capabilities.

### Practicing leadership techniques

It is sometimes hard to find leadership opportunities at work that can help you break through to a new level. But away from the job, you might find an ideal situation to test your leadership potential and practice new skills. For example:

*Carl was a systems analyst who was eager to move into a management position. Since his previous career advances were based on his technical competency, he hadn't had the opportunity to test or demon-*

strate his leadership potential. When nominated by his fellow board members to serve as president of a local child advocacy organization, Carl jumped at the chance. He had the opportunity to practice his skills in running effective meetings, involving others in decision making, and motivating volunteers to meet the organization's financial, educational, and service goals. When a management position opened up in Carl's company, he felt confident he could handle the job and had the real-world experience to prove he could do so.

If you don't have a ready opportunity to lead within a volunteer organization, look for leadership opportunities in other aspects of your private life. Even organizing a family reunion can help you practice how to budget, delegate, lead teams, manage projects, and maintain interpersonal relationships.

### Putting it all together

As the examples suggest, life outside of work is filled with opportunities for developing your leadership skills. The key is to identify your own developmental needs and to find resources both at and away from work to help you achieve your goals.

Start by identifying your career and life aspirations and deciding what skills and perspectives you need in order to get there. Review your roles away from work and look for potential off-the-job experiences to help you learn what you need to know. Seek support for your development by finding people both inside and outside of work who can act as coaches, provide feedback, give moral support, and act as a sounding board. Monitor your progress as you move toward your goal and find new experiences as necessary to shore up your weaknesses.

Interests, roles, and responsibilities outside of work can also serve as creative and supportive sources for learning how to be a more effective manager.

There are three important ways in which private life encourages and enhances leadership development. The first is by providing opportunities to develop psychological strength. A second way is through the support of family relationships and friendships, which can encourage and advise you. A final way is through learning opportunities. The roles you play

off the job can be your laboratory for mastering management skills.

As you begin to experiment and find success among the various avenues of your life, you may find you have the opportunity to be a role model for others as well. Let people know what you're doing. If you have the courage to take this risk, you may find that you bring more honesty and humanity into your organization and help others escape the kind of fragmentation in their lives that can drain their energy. You'll be able to demonstrate how drawing on all our experiences can enliven and enhance our lives and make us better leaders at work.

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