

Q&A Interview with Gary Burnison, author of *Lead*

Q: Can you tell us about your newest book, *Lead*?

Gary: *Lead* is truly a different kind of book. Rather than being the “last word” on leading others, it is meant to be the “first word”—an invitation to the reader to reflect on what the leadership journey means to each and every individual.

At its core, *Lead* will benefit anyone who seeks to inspire, influence, or lead others, whether they are coaches, teachers, pastors, community organizers, politicians—or are in the C-suite. My goal in writing the book was to boil leadership down into very practical, yet inspiring, content—easy-to-digest analogies, colorful stories, useful examples, and thought-provoking takeaways. Every chapter ends with questions for reflection and ideas for action that will empower readers to take their leadership to the next level.

Q: What was your inspiration as you wrote *Lead*, particularly to differentiate it from other books on leading, including your first two, *No Fear of Failure* and *The Twelve Absolutes*?

Gary: I wrote *Lead* as a deeper exploration of the essential elements of leadership, as I have experienced them in my interactions with others over my career. Leadership begins in the person in the mirror. You make a difference, and success will follow. This is as true for the CEO as it is for young people just starting out in their careers. As I told graduates in a commencement speech I delivered recently, over the course of their lifetimes they will have the opportunity to make contact with an estimated 100,000 people. Unfortunately, this “connected” generation is also on

pace to spend two years of their valuable lives using a smartphone—staring at that screen. Therefore, the challenge is to “look up, look around, and look out for others.”

That’s, ultimately, what *Lead* is all about. Instead of taking the left-brain approach of “paradigm shifts” and “leadership models,” I focus on right-brain constants such as emotional connection, compassion, focusing on others, humility, and managing oneself—told through inspiring stories and personal reflection.

Q: Tell us more about the importance of stories in leadership.

Gary: Stories are the language of our human culture. For millennia, humans have used stories to communicate, connect, teach, learn, and pass down the very essence of what it means to be human. Even today, the stories we share tell others what we value, what we stand for, what we find important—even what we consider intolerable. Stories create a common vision and alignment behind an overarching mission in a way that keeps leadership fresh, alive, and relevant. As Peter Guber, CEO of Mandalay Entertainment and producer of blockbuster films such as *Rainman* and *Midnight Express*, told me “Leadership is storytelling in a way that becomes memorable and actionable. Storytelling is as old as human beings.”

Q: What do you see as the power of stories to create connection?

Gary: Our stories tap into the power of shared experiences and common memories. Consider that rush of freedom we had as children when we rode a two-wheel bike for the first time. Just from that sentence alone, most of us can connect with an experience stored in our memories. As

we recall that experience now, it evokes the emotions we felt then—we can actually re-experience that exhilaration.

Now what if I tell you that there was someone back then who was looking on, who made that “freedom” possible? In your mind, you can probably put a face with that image—a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, older sibling... And when I tell you that this is the essence of leadership—a mode of being that is less about analytics and decision-making, and much more about aligning, motivating, and empowering others—that is a lesson that resonates on a very deep, emotional level.

Q: Can you share with us a favorite story from the book?

Gary: What makes a story memorable is the feeling it evokes. I’ll never forget the look on the faces of a 12-year-old boy and his father after this young player made a three-point shot during a basketball practice. I was coaching my son’s basketball team and at the end of every practice, I always asked one player to attempt a three-pointer. If the ball went in, practice was over. If not, the team had to run sprints in the gym. Jason was the youngest on the team and the least experienced. He had not scored a single basket all year, but he was always at practice. At the end of practice before the championship game, I gave Jason the ball. His first shot hit the back of the rim, bounced high off the iron, and grazed the basket on the way down. Seeing him so hopeful while the ball was in the air and then so dejected when it missed, I did something I hadn’t done before: I gave Jason a second chance. His grin was a mile wide when the ball went straight through the basket. Later his father told me with tears in his eyes and in a choked voice, “That

made the entire season for me.” Moral of the story: Leadership is making others believe—in themselves, in the organization, in the impossible—and then translating belief into reality.

Q: You also draw from history and historical figures, from Gandhi to Roosevelt. What do you see as the power of these stories?

Gary: Both the person and the story are iconic. Within these larger-than-life stories we find pieces of our own narrative, whether because of circumstances that we can identify with or because they inspire us to look beyond ourselves. Here’s one of my favorites: A mother brought her young son to a well-respected leader, asking him to cure the boy of his obsession with sugar. The man listened and then said, “Bring your son back in a week, and I will speak to him.” A week later, the mother returned with her son. The leader was none other than Mahatma Gandhi, who told the boy, “Stop eating sweets. They are not good for you.” Realizing that was *it*—this great leader was not going to say any more—the mother was understandably confused. “You could have told him that last week. Why did you have us come back?” she asked. “Last week,” Gandhi admitted, “I, too, was eating a great deal of sugar.” Therein is the heart of leadership: change begins with the leader. To lead others you must first lead yourself.

Leaders must be willing to look, unblinking, into a mirror of self-awareness and ask themselves, “What can I do to make—and be—the change I want to see in the world?” To truly lead others—to motivate and inspire, creating alignment behind a bigger, broader purpose that truly makes the difference for the organization, its customers and clients, and other stakeholders—the leader must be willing to take an honest self-assessment: A leader is only as good as the last promise kept. That’s a pretty powerful place to start.

Q: The graphic images in *Lead* are very compelling, giving readers a very different experience that enhances the storytelling. Can you tell us more about that?

Gary: We live in a very visual environment—offline, online, multimedia, streaming. Consider social media and how people use images, whether a YouTube video or a photo taken with a smartphone. Images give us pause, draw us in, and encourage introspection. When images are coupled with stories, something very powerful happens. It’s part of our physical and emotional DNA. The prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux are still inspiring people nearly 20,000 years later!

Of course, not every “image” packs the same emotional punch. Pie charts never evoked emotion and PowerPoints rarely move someone to tears. Images must captivate and inspire, conveying the leader’s vision of the current reality—or what reality can become. When the leader speaks people listen with all of their senses. They know immediately if there is a conflict between the words they hear and the leader’s presence, body language, gestures, and facial expression. When the leader’s image is one of confidence, humility, and genuine interest in the well-being of others, that’s a powerful message to convey.

Q: In closing, what is your advice to leaders today?

Gary: Once again, it starts by looking in the mirror. Know what you stand for. Communicate to others the mission and vision that you embrace, and invite them to align with you in service of a larger purpose. Whether you’re the president of the local PTA, the chair of a community group, or the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, the same approach applies. People have to know you to

follow you. If you are looking for others to believe in you, that could mean waiting for a very long time. Rather, believe in others and you will be amazed by the results.

As a leader, you need humility and grace, to know it's not about you. You must be constantly ready to find the next best idea from you most junior employees. Being a leader isn't about enforcement, but empowerment—which means being all in, all the time, living and breathing the success of the organization.

You can't convey that by talking "at" people, but by talking with them—telling your story. Then, together, you can author an even bigger story of purpose, passion, and making a difference.