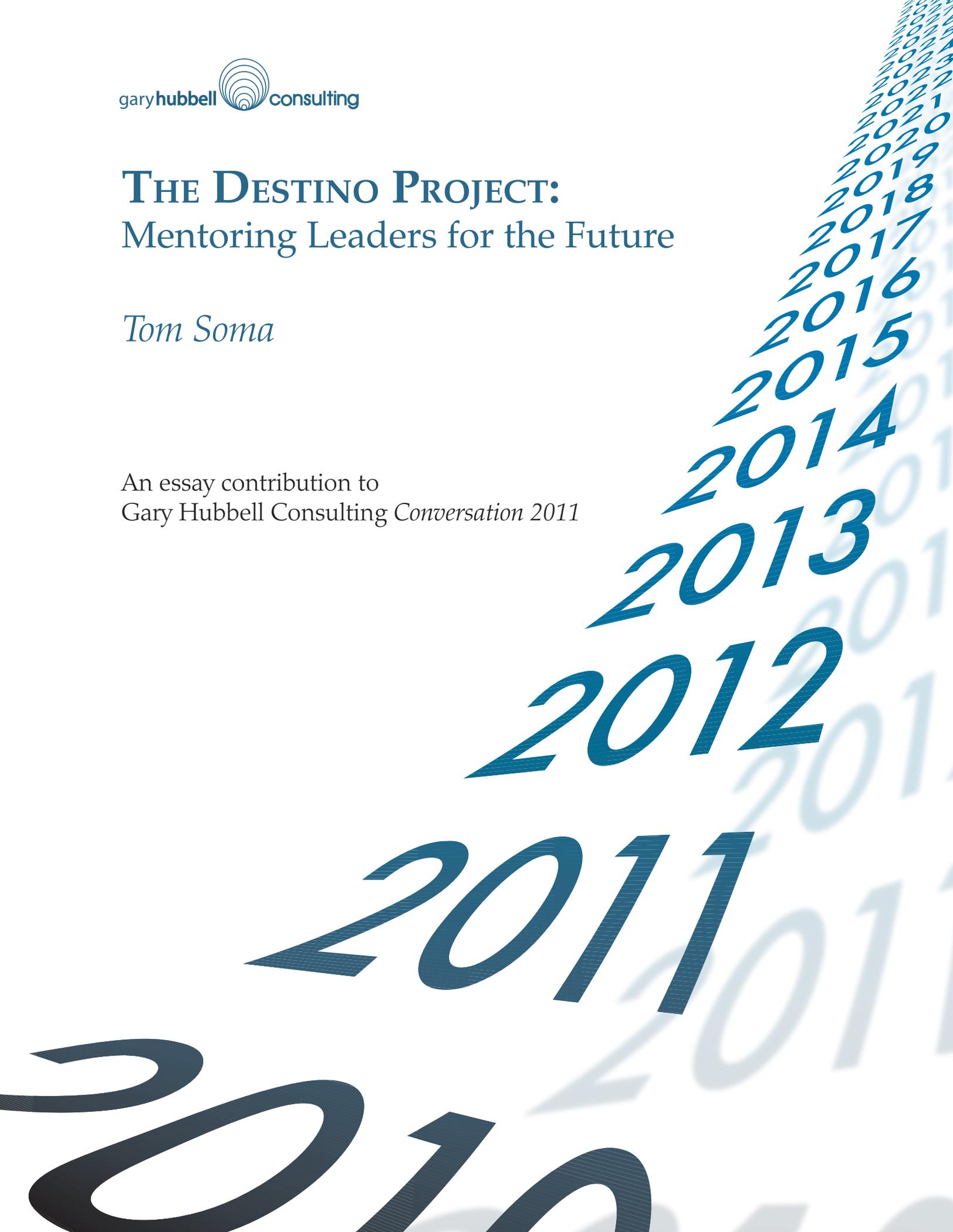


THE DESTINO PROJECT: Mentoring Leaders for the Future

Tom Soma

An essay contribution to
Gary Hubbell Consulting *Conversation 2011*



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ABOUT GARY HUBBELL CONSULTING CONVERSATION

Annually, Gary Hubbell Consulting convenes and hosts a small hand-picked group of social sector professionals from throughout North America for three days of intense dialogue and critical thinking. We strive to create a thought-provoking, mind-opening, and stimulating conversation about philanthropy, organizational leadership, and social sector change. This deep exploration of the nature and challenges of the philanthropic environment is intended to engage, inform, and inspire senior leaders to be catalysts for change in their own organizations and communities of influence. With each *GHC Conversation*, we seek to establish the seeds of a continuing and enriching network that nourishes us as individuals and helps each of us change how we converse, inspire, and seek new dimensions of philanthropy.

Gary Hubbell Consulting *Conversation 2011*



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A long-time resident of Portland, Oregon, Tom Soma is serving his 13th year as Executive Director of Ronald McDonald House Charities® of Oregon and Southwest Washington. Previously, he worked as a development staff member at the University of Portland and Lewis & Clark College. He has also supported himself as a writer and consultant, and spent eight years as a full-time parent to his three daughters (now all grown and gone!). A 1979 graduate of the University of Notre Dame, Tom enjoys reading, writing, running, and cooking (not necessarily in that order). There is always a plate for Elijah at his table, and a guest room in his home for friends from near and far!

This is Tom's third *GHC Conversation*.

THE DESTINO PROJECT: MENTORING LEADERS FOR THE FUTURE

By Tom Soma

The best way to predict the future is to invent it. – Theodore Hook¹

In October, 1810, 22-year-old Theodore Hook made a rather audacious bet with his friend, Samuel Beazley—then proceeded to orchestrate one of the most elaborate pranks in British history (later dubbed “The Berners Street Hoax”):

At 9 am on November 10, 1810, a coal delivery man knocked on the door of Mrs. Tottenham, who lived at 10 Berners Street in London. He had a delivery of coal for her. She told him she hadn't (ordered) any coal, and he went away.

Mrs. Tottenham thought nothing of the incident, but soon after a bread delivery man knocked on her door. She sent him away too, but he was followed by delivery men bearing almost everything imaginable: furniture, musical instruments, flowers, fish, fresh vegetables, a wedding cake, and even tanks of lager piled high on a brewer's dray. Tradesmen also showed up at her door: chimney sweeps, physicians, dentists, wig-makers, gardeners, housemaids, and undertakers.

Dignitaries then began to arrive. The Governor of the Bank of England showed up, searching for the widow who had written him of her intent to settle a sizeable endowment on the Bank. The Archbishop of Canterbury was close behind, followed by

¹ “Conversations in Management,” retrieved January 2, 2011, from http://thehoustonpilgrim.com/CM/Hook_08_19_07.htm

prominent businessmen, cabinet ministers, Dukes, and finally the Lord Mayor of London.

By midday, so many people were crowded into the narrow street in front of her house that it was hard even to move. Mrs. Tottenham had no idea what to make of it all. Somehow a cart was knocked over, fighting broke out, and a near riot ensued. It was well past dark by the time the crowd began to thin out.

When the dust had all settled, two men emerged from a neighboring house, shook hands, and exchanged a guinea. The two men were Theodore Hook, a writer of popular comic operas, and his friend Samuel Beazley. Hook had bet Beazley a guinea that he could transform any house in London into the most talked about address in the city within a week. To win the bet Hook wrote hundreds of letters directing all the tradesmen, delivery men, and dignitaries in London to visit 10 Berners Street. Although Hook eventually confessed to being the mastermind behind the hoax, he never faced any punishment for it.²

Predicting the future is at best a game of chance. Sure, it's fun—and if you're lucky or smart enough, you might actually cash in a bet. But the longer the horizon, the lower the odds of being around to benefit from either your good fortune *or* good sense. And while predicting the future may be entertaining, attempting to shape or influence it, as Hook mischievously demonstrated, is another undertaking.

Two years ago, at the close of "*Conversation 2009*," a gathering of non-profit leaders to explore issues in philanthropy, I was challenged to take the future into my own hands—to identify some issue or reality that would benefit from my considered initiative. At the time, I concluded that the greatest need—in both the public *and* private sector—was for creative, compelling leadership—and that the best way for me to shape the future I desired was to assist in the formation of promising young leaders.

DESTINO—OR DESTINY?

*"Become a stronger, more effective leader in just one high-energy, intensive day of power-packed training!" (From **CareerTrack** catalog, January & February*

² "The Berners Street Hoax," retrieved January 7, 2011, from http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/archive/permalink/the_bernerns_street_hoax/

2011, promoting the workshop, “*Creative Leadership for Managers, Supervisors and Team Leaders*”)

If only it were so simple.

I opt for the longer view. Engendering leadership is a process. It takes time. And it benefits, I believe, from an ongoing give-and-take that is best likened to a craftsman’s apprenticeship. That belief—coupled with the closing challenge of *Conversation 2009*, resulted in an experiment in leadership development that four colleagues and I fondly call, “The Destino Project.”

While the name sounds grandiose, it actually refers to the coffee shop where the five of us convene monthly to “talk shop.” Café Destino is a modest bistro on the corner of Northeast Fremont and 14th in Portland, Oregon, where our experiment was conceived and continues to evolve. That rooting in place is part of the project’s elegance—and one of the elements that make it such an easily-replicable model for leadership development.

Like informal klatches that have similarly assembled for centuries, our gatherings began innocuously. Mark Holloway (Executive Director, Social Venture Partners Portland) and I had already been meeting monthly, just to compare notes. Thinking that our mutually supportive connection might benefit from the addition of like-minded peers, we invited three others to join us: Jeff Anderson (Chief Operating Officer, The Oregon Community Foundation), Andy Nelson (Executive Director, Hands On Greater Portland), and Keith Thomajan (President and CEO, Camp Fire USA, Portland Metro Council). Several months into the burgeoning association, I returned from the conference and put both an observation and challenge on the table.

The observation (which instantly resonated with all four colleagues): Looking back on my 30-year professional life, the one thing I had always longed for but never found was a mentor—someone older, wiser, and more experienced who would take me under his wing and help advance my budding non-profit career.

The challenge: How might we (now that each of us had arrived at that older—and ostensibly wiser and more experienced stage in our respective careers), give to others that which had been so desirable—yet so inaccessible—to us? Could we proactively shape the future and benefit the greater Portland community by extending ourselves to younger professionals who might someday occupy our own or similar positions of leadership?

Over the next few months, the five of us began to fashion the initiative that would put those questions to the test.

GETTING STARTED

After co-founding and helping to grow Infosys Technologies into a \$10 billion company, CEO Naryana Murthy assumed a new role as “nonexecutive chairman and chief mentor” when he turned 60.

Asked at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, why he chose that role for himself, he said his primary role as a leader was to ensure successive generations of leaders... (and that) his greatest value was not in his intelligence, but in how he invested his intelligence in others.³

Murthy’s premise—that *we* are *responsible* for preparing future leaders—was at the core of our endeavor. Our initial question: Within the constraints of our own considerable obligations (both at work and home), how might we embrace this responsibility in a meaningful yet reasonable fashion? We wanted to do something that would be enjoyable, educational, intimate, and manageable—for *everyone* involved. So, our first decision was to keep the project modest, with each of us agreeing to mentor two younger professionals.

We then formulated two complementary program elements. The first would be regular meetings in which each mentor and his mentees would explore (over breakfast, lunch, coffee, beer, whatever) any issues, experiences, or questions that were of mutual interest. While those would serve as a solid and flexible foundation, we felt they needed to be reinforced by periodic gatherings in which mentors and mentees would examine larger issues of collective relevance. So, we decided to include five theme-oriented group sessions. Our intent was to create a learning community in which both mentors and mentees would benefit from a cross-generational, cross-organizational, and cross-hierarchical exchange.

Having embraced our responsibilities and framed what seemed a workable plan, we needed to recruit some mentees (not to be confused with guinea pigs). After discussing the characteristics that might distinguish a “future leader” (age, role, experience, personality, etc.), we decided that each of us would simply use our best judgment, explain the

³ Liz Wiseman, with Greg McKeown, *Multipliers: How the best leaders make everyone smarter*, 2010, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, p. 187

experiment to two or three rising “stars” in the non-profit sector, and invite them to participate. We were free to nominate employees from our own organizations who we felt would benefit from the tutelage of a mentor to whom they did not report.

The planning process and selection of an initial cohort took nearly six months. At an introductory dinner hosted by the mentors at my home, we laid out the program elements and elicited input from the mentees about their specific interests and needs. Based on that input, we paired ourselves with the mentees who seemed the most appropriate (or, in all honesty, the ones who intrigued us most).

THE PROJECT’S FIRST YEAR

Initially, we conceived the initiative as a one-year effort—during which time mentors and mentees would meet regularly (I chose once a month), and conduct the five group sessions (with each mentor assigned to lead one session). While the individual mentor-mentee meetings presented a minor but surmountable scheduling burden for some, the group gatherings have definitely been a challenge. Having conducted three during 2010, we decided to extend the project an additional six months into 2011, during which time two more sessions are planned. The extension has not met with resistance.

Consistent with our original design and intent, the project has maintained an informal, ad-hoc, organic flavor—loosely structured, responsive, dynamic. In my monthly sessions with Hans and Kristin (hopefully, it’s safe to use their real first names), my suggestions have served as a springboard for approximately half the discussions—but even then, questions emerge and conversations evolve around *their* related desires and needs. While we’ve often begun with a specific article or book, we’ve ended up exploring leadership styles, salary negotiation, career ladders, impact measurement (both individual and organizational), and managing up, down and sideways. Both mentees have approached me between sessions with specific, work-related questions. So, it’s been a practical give-and-take, in real time—as has been the case for the other mentors and mentees.

Likewise, our group gatherings have been highly interactive. Topics to date include the Enneagram (a system for understanding personalities, for which we engaged a local expert), work-life balance, and leadership in times of ambiguity (both of which were facilitated by mentors). Next up is an exploration of different approaches to organizational planning, which will be led by an outside consultant. All of these topics were identified at the initial community gathering and refined by the mentors during our regular monthly meetings.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

One thing the mentors recognized at the outset is the inherent difficulty aspiring leaders have approaching their own supervisors for the kind of mentoring we hoped to facilitate. Within every organization, the focus is understandably *immediate*—which sometimes makes it difficult for leaders to afford subordinates the kind of “big picture” mentoring they deserve. Our intent (which I can safely say has been realized across the board) was to extend these ten younger professionals an opportunity to step *outside of and back from* their daily responsibilities and simply reflect—if only for an hour or two a month, and with a mentor who was *not* their immediate supervisor. We provided a safe space outside the formal work setting and a sounding board in the form of a seasoned leader who wasn’t monitoring and evaluating their performance. (A pay-off for me—I was able to nominate my development director for mentoring by a trusted peer). In short, we offered them access to our knowledge and experience for their own formation and sense making—with no strings attached. I think that contributes considerably to a more open, honest, and effective mentoring dynamic.

Another initial understanding: We aren’t authorities! We *are* active practitioners. While each of us has enjoyed successful tenures in our current roles, none of us harbor any illusion of being the next Peter Drucker! On the contrary, the Destino monthly gatherings are a simultaneous recognition of our own inherent limitations and corresponding desire to access our collective wisdom. We’re still learning ourselves (which itself serves as a valuable model). Through the project, mentees have an intimate glimpse of both our strengths *and* shortcomings—which is, ironically, another elegant feature of the project. While they get our attention and the benefit of at least two decades of experience, they aren’t getting Naryana Murthy—or anyone else of that caliber—which actually adds to the formative opportunity *and* enhances the project’s replicability!

That said, and at the risk of stating the obvious: *the ingredient most critical to the success of the mentoring relationship is the desire and commitment of both mentor and mentee*. The more active (and consequently, most beneficial) pairings directly reflect the interest and initiative of those involved.

What distinguishes this effort from others I’ve observed is the focus on leadership cultivation for its own sake. Participation is voluntary and the benefits intrinsic. There is no graduate school or continuing education credit. At one point, however, Hans volunteered

that our meetings were a *much* more intimate, in-depth exploration of relevant issues than *any* of his graduate school classes—for which he still owes a sizable debt!

Another significant benefit to this model—evidenced by the large group gatherings—is that mentees have periodic access to *multiple* leaders and leadership perspectives. This reflects our underlying belief that budding leaders benefit from exposure to diverse styles and personalities as they attempt to forge and refine their own.

While our primary intent was to establish a working mentor-mentee dynamic, the experiment actually facilitated at least four specific inter-relationships (two of which were immediately intended, a third which was an unplanned by-product, and a fourth which represents our ultimate hope):

Intentional dynamics:

- **Mentor-to-mentor.** Through our planning, collaboration, and voluntary effort, the mentors model not only a cooperative, communal approach to leadership formation, but also a readily accessible means of continuing education.
- **Mentor-to-mentee.** The facilitation of apprenticeship-style learning, in both individual and group settings.

By-product:

- **Mentee-to-mentee.** Through both the large group gatherings in which everyone participates and individual sessions that include another mentee, mentees engage with peers who have similar responsibilities and aspirations—and who they might not have met otherwise. Consequently, they have become resources for each other (much like their mentors).

Ultimate hope:

- **Mentee becomes mentor.** Ideally, the cycle repeats itself. At some point, current mentees will extend themselves as mentors to others—“paying it forward,” as it were.

Though not intended, the project has clearly expanded the professional networks of both mentors and mentees. While no one has changed jobs, I have recommended mentees for open positions with other organizations. I imagine it’s only a matter of time before some mentee accepts a position with (or made possible by) his or her mentor. This calls to mind

perhaps the most inspiring element of the project: its community approach to leadership development.

By working *across* (as opposed to *within*) organizational lines, we facilitated open, candid discussion about issues in which the mentees were truly interested. A more traditional form of mentoring *should* occur in our respective organizations as we guide subordinates. However, this model *crosses* organizational lines and “pollinates” leadership in *other* (and what might narrowly be perceived as *competing*) organizations. By doing so, we embraced a uniquely collaborative approach to leadership development. We’re training leaders purely for their gain and society’s future—not for any immediate or anticipated benefit to our respective organizations. In that sense, we’re truly advancing “the common good.”

Finally—and while also obvious, it merits note—I continue to profit considerably from my role as a mentor. Besides the pure enjoyment I derive from my time with mentees (and the memories it evokes of being in their shoes 10 or 15 or 25 years ago), the exercise helps me stay fresh. I get an insight into what my subordinates might be thinking about *me* (not necessarily what I bargained for!). The mentees prompt me to consider and re-consider critical issues. Their earnestness inspires me. They keep me on my toes—and challenge me to be more flexible and sensitive.

THOUGHTS ABOUT LEADERSHIP EVOKED BY THE PROJECT

*The great leader speaks little.
He never speaks carelessly.
He works without self-interest
and leaves no trace.
When all is finished, the people say,
“We did it ourselves.”⁴*

Are leaders *born* or *bred*? My mentees and I discussed that question early on, during two 90-minute sessions. Our conclusion: Leaders are born *and* bred. Certainly, “natural” leaders possess varying degrees of passion, motivation, charisma, curiosity, and desire, all of which might be “inherited” to some degree. But they also benefit from education, experience, empowerment, role-modeling, and sober self-reflection—all either disciplines or gifts.

⁴ Dr. Wayne H. Dyer, *Change Your Thoughts—Change Your Life: Living the Wisdom of the Tao*, 2007, Hay House, Inc., Carlsbad, CA, p. 76

Obviously, you can't make a leader out of someone unsuited to the role. Initiatives such as this *can* bring out the best in someone who innately "has what it takes" and just needs guidance and/or inspiration. But not even the best and most expensive leadership training can guarantee the outcome!

Our collective conclusions to date: Great leaders engage, empower, mobilize, challenge, and inspire. They ask compelling questions rather than provide stock answers. They guide and elicit, rather than dictate. They communicate openly and convey confidence. They create an environment where people perceive themselves as part of a solution and take responsibility for creating it. They model openness and candor, and go beyond respect to rapport.

My view: Leadership is far too critical to be left to a single person. If organizations (even and especially small ones such as mine) are to be successful, leadership should be encouraged and borne widely. While deference may (at least initially) be extended to those at the top of the organizational chart, the mantle of leadership must ultimately be *earned* no matter what your title. You can assert leadership from *any* position in an organization—provided you're patient and listen well. In fact, sometimes it's *easier* to lead from a mid-level role (such as the ones currently occupied by my mentees)—where the pressure isn't necessarily as intense.

The bottom line: True leaders touch the spark to do good that exists in everyone. They must stand simultaneously inside and outside the organizations they lead. They need to be courageous. And most importantly, they need to remain grounded, drawing from an inner fortitude even under the most trying circumstances.

There is no "prescription" for this. But I continue to ask my mentees the questions I consider essential to both my own formation and theirs: *What's important? What gives you energy? What makes you happy? What do you love? What would you like your legacy to be?* I encourage them to ponder such questions—and to live the answers. So far, I've been impressed by what I've seen. As Hans put it at the end of one session, "Leadership is like yoga—it's about alignment, not striving."

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

There are those who depend on us, watch us, learn from us, take from us. And we never know. Don't sell yourself short. You may never have proof of your importance, but you are more important than you think. It reminds me of an old Sufi story of a good man who was granted one wish by God. The man said he would like to

*go about doing good without knowing about it. God granted his wish. And then God decided it was such a good idea, he would grant that wish to all human beings. And so it has been to this day.*⁵

What might this experiment suggest about the practice and promise of philanthropy? What future is waiting to emerge, dependent on me to bring it into being? If nothing else, I'm certain of this: ***These ten young people ARE the future!***

Twenty years ago, *I* was the future. And while I may still have something to offer, what I *know* is that, 20 years from now, my future will be in the hands of people like Hans and Kristin, and the eight other participants in this project. They will be guiding the social service organizations likely to be serving *me*. As George Carlin put it, "The future will soon be a thing of the past." So will I. And I certainly hope that, 20 years from now — when I'm in my mid-70s — I find myself residing in a community that's even more compassionate and caring than the one I'm trying to advance through my efforts now.

Can I act? Should I act to influence the future, whatever it might be? Of course! Aside from the fact that it's in my own interest, failure to do so is a fundamental abdication of responsibility.

The world is small and growing smaller. We can no longer afford to think narrowly. Interdependence is replacing independence as a relational paradigm. If we, as a global community, are to tackle the BIG challenges — food, water, health care, the environment — collaboration must replace competition as the problem-solving methodology of first resort.

If the Destino Project proves anything, it's that the *practice* of this brand of philanthropy is simultaneously its *promise*! In an almost embarrassingly simple way, our experiment in leadership formation demonstrates that even unrelated organizations can collaborate in significant ways to benefit society now and in the future. We *can*, quite easily, move beyond "vested" to "shared" interests.

⁵ Robert L. Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, 1989, Villard Books, New York, NY, p. 80.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that this project—which requires only a minimal outlay of time and (depending on the price of coffee) even *less* money—can be replicated just about anywhere by just about anyone. I hope that's the case.

My personal investment (and that of my four colleagues)—in Kristin, Hans, and the eight other mentees—isn't static. On the contrary, it's inherently dynamic. It doesn't stop with them. Having benefited from whatever they've gained, they're positioned (and hopefully inspired) to emulate our initiative. Ideally, it's a spiral approach to leadership—where knowledge is continually refined and re-transmitted. I like to think I'm advancing the wheel. I certainly believe I need to keep trying—for, as Robert Fulghum so eloquently points out, you never know...

Leadership Development Community (LDC)

