

Pivotal Situations Oftentimes Seal Some Leaders' Careers

As seen in the WSJ

Leadership advice is easy to find these days: workshops, conferences and private coaching sessions, often for a hefty price, on how to make the leap from executive to leader.

Yet those who have proved their ability to inspire rarely say they were guided by formal instruction. Instead, they point to life experiences that were pivotal in helping them recognize a capacity to make things happen and to get others behind them.

Many of these people show some qualities of young children: curiosity, boundless energy to put into practice what they learn, and a willingness to pick themselves up and keep going when they fall.

Jack Kahl, founder and former CEO of Manco, known for its popular Duck brand of duct tape, says he learned his most crucial leadership lesson from his mother when he was seven years old.

His father had been stricken with tuberculosis, and his mother told her children they would have to work as a team to keep the family afloat financially and emotionally. Mr. Kahl began delivering newspapers, learning quickly that if he did his job well and pleased customers, they liked him.

His mother told him and his five siblings to open bank accounts but to leave in only enough money to keep them open. "She told me to use the money I had to buy a door for our family garage, and told my brothers and sisters to get other parts," he says. "Together, we all built our garage."

Years later, when he founded Manco, based in Avon, Ohio, Mr. Kahl adapted his mother's consensual style rather than what he had learned as a business major at John Carroll University, Cleveland. "They taught us command-and-control management, and it was all wrong," he says. "A great leader knows that people must be included in the company's decision-making process and that you have to share information with developing leaders rather than hoard it."

Mr. Kahl says his best role model in the business world was Sam Walton, founder of retail giant Wal-Mart. "When I met him, I thought I had met my mother in a new form," he says. "Sam was the consummate coach, forever building up his people, telling them, 'Thank you; that's a good idea.'"

Mr. Kahl recalls: "He shared detailed information with all his employees, even part-timers, about how much Wal-Mart paid for their products and what they sold them for, so everyone felt part of the game."

He did the same with his employees to foster teamwork and innovation. In 30 years, he built Manco from a small regional business to an international marketer, and then sold it to Henkel Group, a German company, in 1998 for \$90 million.

Warren Bennis, founding chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California, and Robert Thomas, senior research fellow of Accenture's Institute for Strategic Change in Cambridge, Mass., believe all leaders have undergone at least one crucible experience that unleashed their abilities and taught them who they were.

The two professors studied 43 leaders -- half of them 70 or older and half 35 and younger -- for their book "Geeks and Geezers" (Harvard Business School Press) due out next month. Their transformational experiences varied from being mentored, to climbing a mountain, to losing an election, but ultimately proved more important than the person's education, intelligence or birth order. "Sometimes it is an event, sometimes it is a relationship ... sometimes joyous, sometimes tragic ... but it's always a powerful process of learning and adaptation," they write. "It is both an opportunity and a test."

Bob Rich Jr., president and CEO of Rich Products, a Buffalo maker of food products, says his crucible experience came right after he graduated from college, when his father gave him the chance to launch a subsidiary of the family-run company in Canada. "I was 22 years old and at the age when I was convinced that my father knew very little," he recalls ruefully. "But I soon found out otherwise. Here I was thrown into the breach with a million-dollar budget and responsibility for building a new plant, and I knew nothing."

He began seeking his father's advice, and soon discovered he was a wise business adviser. "We became very close through that process," he says. The experience also taught him to be more tolerant and respectful of others and not to make glib assumptions. Placed so early in his career in a leadership role, he has always sought the counsel of employees throughout his company, he says.