



Leadership Lab <sup>no</sup> 19  
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### From the CEO's Perspective

My passion for leadership – a passion that shaped my career and ultimately led to writing this book – has two beginnings: One in 1938 Germany, and the other a serendipitous introduction to a man at the Four Seasons Hotel in Seattle 62 years later. These beginnings – seemingly unrelated – are, in fact, deeply connected. Each represents an essential half of any effective leadership: First, the wish to lead and, second, the learned skills to do so.

First, to Germany and my development as a Survivor Archetype. My parents were holocaust survivors. And while this is not that story, it does explain my innate leadership. My dad, Klaus Citterman (1921-2009), escaped Germany in 1938. That same year, at the age of 10, my mom, Ruth Levinson Citterman, fled Austria with her parents. (Incidentally, my mom, at 86, still lives independently in Portland, Oregon, where they met.)

Where does the Survivor Archetype come from? On November 9, 1938, in Germany and parts of Austria, the Nazis orchestrated a series of coordinated attacks against Jews. The attacks became known as Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass), and the morning after them my dad, just 17 years old, was arrested and taken to the city's central train station. There, he was lined up for deportation to Buchenwald concentration camp. Instead of accepting this destiny, something in him tempted fate.

He approached a Nazi soldier and requested he be released. (this is the 140-character version.) He pled his case, and was taken – his heart pounding -- to hide in empty rooms, behind open doors. By the end of the day, he was released. The Nazi soldier escorted him out through the gates of the station and gave him bus fare to get home.

By that point, all the world's doors had closed to Jews. But a desperate appeal yielded three tickets to China, the only land that didn't require a visa for entrance. My dad and his parents escaped to Shanghai, where the culture and language couldn't have been more different. He survived there for nine years, working in various mechanical jobs and learning the trade, before coming to the United States in 1947.

Although my parents found their own personal strength in tragic and traumatic circumstances, I absorbed the Survivor Archetype from them as I grew up. This archetype is described as having the ability to thrive on struggle; I would include the ability to embrace ambiguity. Survivors find the sense of security stagnant and stifling. Hence, Survivors often seek risk rather than contentment.

The Survivor Archetype is alive and well in me – flowing through my veins, constantly penetrating my psyche. And yes, there's an obvious question. How is it that someone born in 1970 has parents who experienced Holocaust atrocities firsthand? At the time of my birth, my mom was 42 and my dad, 50. These would-be trendsetters were among the pioneering parents of the "later- in -life" baby phenomena, which today is recognized as normal. That's how it happened. And, given that I wasn't my parents' first rodeo, I joined an already-made family of two older sisters and an older brother. They had a head start of 13 to 19 years, and their formative years took place in a time of unprecedented social change. One could say I was the beneficiary of their fresh thinking.

My oldest sister had the greatest impact on me. Her teen years, during the 1960s and '70s, were shaped by the disorder and chaos of the counterculture thinking of the times. The upshot is that she gave me the message of equality and challenged the traditional roles of women. She instilled in me that I could be anything I wanted to be, and I believed her.

She said I could run faster than the boys, so I beat them every chance I could. She said I could be a homerun hitter, so every time I stepped up to the plate (on my mixed boys and girl's baseball team), I hit the ball harder and farther than anyone else. At nine years old, it was pretty satisfying to hear the coach of the other team tell his outfielders to back up" because that girl is up to bat again. "

In the earliest stages of my life, my sister inspired my self-confidence and an aggressive, no-fear conviction. While I've worked hard to temper the aggressiveness, that sense of self and risk-taking continues to shape me today. (Yes, trapeze is a hobby of mine.)

### **Learned Leadership**

Given my background, I suppose it's no surprise that throughout my life, I've been borderline obsessive in my need to understand the complicated issues related to authority -- leadership, power and influence. But I still had to learn leadership skills. That's why we move forward to a fortuitous introduction at the Four Seasons Hotel in Seattle. That's when I met a man who became my mentor and remains a close friend and ally.

On October 31, 2000, I was looking for a job. I had a job in a large mobile phone company, but it was the dot com era, and I was curious about what was going on beyond the walls of traditional corporate America. Job hunting and interviewing was sort of a hobby for me. Looking back, I think it was a strategic way of networking.

In the process, I connected with a man who has now passed away, but was known as a pillar in our community. Dick Friel suggested I take my resume to the Four Seasons Hotel (now the Fairmont) around 4 p.m. that afternoon. He told me to look for the man in an Italian suit with a corn-cob pipe: "His name is Michael."

That afternoon, I spotted the man sitting at a table in the bar. I approach him cautiously, and he invited me to join him and a few others for a drink. I handed him my resume. He glanced at it, asked a few questions and then his phone rang.

While he turned away to take the call, the woman sitting across from me struck up a conversation. She lamented about how difficult it was to select the right boarding school for her daughter. I wasn't really qualified to weigh in, so I just listened. The man next to her mentioned that he had a suit of armor collection, 14 of which he had just sold to buy a castle somewhere in Europe. Who are these people?

Mike hung up his phone and turned back to me. "You do PR, right?"

I nodded.

"How would you deal with a reporter in regards to a very high-profile commercial real estate deal?" His tone was curt and commanding. He told me the details of a deal he was involved in and insisted this information was highly confidential. He insinuated that if the deal went through, perhaps I'd have a job handling the PR.

I knew this was a test and started to formulate a smart response, but before I had an opportunity to respond, a reporter from the Seattle Times walked up. He joined us at the table and introduced himself. He was new to the commercial real estate beat and wanted pick Mike's brain.

Mike began to tell the reporter the same information he had told me "in confidence." The reporter reached for a pad and pen, and Mike waived it away. He leaned in. "No names, everything on background -- off the record. If you fuck me, I'll never work with your paper again. Understand?" The table was quiet; the reporter nodded. Mike proceeded. I knew this wasn't his first press encounter, but I sat beside him and cringed.

When he finished, he turned to me. "I can see by your body language, you would have handled this information differently. What would you have said?"

I froze. I was a deer in the headlights in an incredibly awkward, three-way with a reporter. I began to tell Mike what I would have done things differently, and he interrupted. "Am I being lectured?" he demanded.

"Perhaps," I responded.

Mike abruptly ended the conversation, and the three of us exchanged business cards. The reporter and I exchanged "WTF" glances and he left the table.

Mike turned to me again. "Well, what are you going to do for dinner?" he demanded in his low voice.

Is this guy hitting on me?

"Listen," he said. "I'll take you to dinner on the condition I can ask you 30 minutes of questions."

I was curious. I said, "I'll go to dinner with you on the condition I can ask you 30 minutes of questions."

He quickly moved to his next topic. At the end of the evening, he invited me back to the Four Seasons the following Tuesday to meet some “people you should know.” “If you come to 10 of these, you’ll have 10 different job offers,” he said.

He sent me home with a driver. When I woke up the next day, I had no idea how life was about to change.

The next Tuesday, when I arrived at the Four Seasons, 10 businessmen were gathered around a table full of cocktails. Mike led the three-ring circus and demanded that everyone around the table introduce themselves and explain why they were there. Everyone introduced himself, and then broke off into side conversations. This would become a familiar ritual for me.

After two hours or so of this type of “session,” we would leave. Mike would take me to dinner and drill me for 20 minutes. “What was the dynamic between player A and player B? What did you see in the body language of player C? Who was the weakest link at the table and who had the most power?” The fire hose of questions went on and on, and this became our ritual for more than a decade.

During these ‘sessions,’ I learned to listen closely, process information quickly, assess the dynamics of the people and understand the subtleties of the situation. I practiced as a devoted student. I stopped looking for a job and started my own business. I honed my strategic thinking skills and developed interpersonal skills; both, research tells us, are lacking in today’s leaders.

Through this sometimes informal, but usually formal, mentorship the experience was profound. It made me deliberate in how and what I thought, how I supported my thinking, and how I acted. I began to perceive the world through the measurement of influence, and internalized the mantra that “power is always in the question.”

Today, I’ve chosen a career (or perhaps it’s chosen me) centered on developing emerging executives and refining the strengths and awareness of CEOs.

So naturally, a blog post on the Huffington Post caught my eye. Whether you deem Huffington Post a credible source of news, the topic and research raised an interesting point: Here we are living in a time of great opportunity. Technology offers global access at an unprecedented level. And yet, as a country we are not positioned to fully absorb or exploit these opportunities. According to the research (not to mention word on the street and almost any new business book you read), the demand for leadership talent significantly exceeds supply. The Huffington Post piece cites research by AON Consulting showing nearly 60% of U.S. companies face leadership talent shortages.

We talk about the gap between the haves and the have-nots, about the gap in achievement, about the earnings gap. Why aren’t we talking more about the gap in leadership – the chasm that exists for the emerging executives entering the ranks of leadership.

I decided to start that conversation.