

BECOMING AN INVITATIONAL LEADER

**A New Approach to Professional
and Personal Success**

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Becoming an Invitational Leader
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Introduction to Invitational Leadership

“Leaders articulate and define what has previously remained implicit or unsaid; then they invent images, metaphors, and models that provide a focus for new attention.”

—Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus,
Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge

WE BEGIN WITH a question you might well ask: Does the world really need another book on leadership? Certainly there are more than enough studies of leadership available — everything from the maddeningly academic to the frustratingly superficial — and indeed by now there is even a book called *Leadership for Dummies*. With respect to that book’s aim, we see no reason to be obscure about this subject, and we wouldn’t presume to label as a “dummy” anyone seeking to learn the art of leadership. No, we take up this subject because we think we have discovered through the years a more practical, holistic, and dynamic model of leadership — one that encourages leaders to pursue more joyful and more meaningful personal and professional lives, and to invite their colleagues, family, friends, loved ones, and community to do the same. We call this model *Invitational Leadership*.

The term “invitational” was chosen because this word has special meaning. A concept like “invitation” is the product of centuries of human effort by those seeking to communicate ideas. This involves shaping, molding, and changing the meanings of words. The word “invite” is a derivation of the Latin word *invitare*. It probably began as *vito*, which means to avoid and shun. In early Roman society, *vito* was used to express fear of encroachments by other tribes and to forbid their entry into Rome. As Rome became a dominant force, its citizens felt more secure and opened

their borders to the world. In time the term prefix in meaning “without” or “not” was added, and the word invite, which means “to receive politely,” became common and developed into “invite.” So, by definition, an invitation is a generous act of cordially calling forth or summoning.

Invitational Leadership is a Theory of Practice

Most of us tend to think of leadership as something that is exerted by one individual onto others — that is, the leader, having earned a position of dominance and power, begins to issue orders and direct his or her subordinates. The fallacy of an “acting upon” mentality has been extensively documented, proving that great companies are not driven by top-down orders. By contrast, Invitational Leadership involves a generous and genuine turning toward others in empathy and respect, with the ultimate goal of collaborating with them on projects of mutual benefit. The emphasis shifts from command and control to cooperation and communication; from manipulation to cordial summons; from exclusiveness to inclusiveness; from *subordinates to associates*.

Invitational Leadership is a way of thinking and acting with respect to what is believed to be worthwhile in human interactions. It is democratically oriented and ethical in approach. As a developing theory of practice, Invitational Leadership is incomplete with questions unanswered and avenues unexplored, and that’s a good thing — remaining open to new opportunities for growth is integral to the success of our model. Always evolving, Invitational Leadership points in a hopeful direction that offers a common language in communication and a practical approach to leadership.

The Need for Invitational Leadership

There is a great and pressing need in everyday life for a special kind of leader who can be a force for positive social change and who can gain the voluntary and enthusiastic support of others. This leader can bond people together within a circle of respect, trust, and optimism. We believe that Invitational Leadership meets this need.

The concept of “invitational” leadership may appear to be fragile when compared with models and theories that advocate taking charge, being tough-minded, gaining the competitive edge, practicing impact leadership, and even picturing the leader as Samurai warrior or martial artist. In fact, the opposite is the key to successful leadership. To invite is to offer something beneficial for consideration. It is an intentional call-to-action based on collaboration.

Most books on leadership focus on habits, traits, skills, and behaviors. These books are silent or inarticulate about what goes on in the perceptual world of the individual. Authors unintentionally disclose disrespect for the feelings of fellow human beings by demonstrating an “acting-upon” mentality. These authors use such terms as empowering, turning on, lifting up, motivating, building, enhancing, making, reinforcing, energizing, and shaping. This kind of language may be suitable when working with objects or machines, but it is inappropriate when working with human beings.

There is an obvious danger in the objectification of people. Individuals are not functionaries to a particular system. You can turn on a light switch, build a doghouse, shape clay, energize your battery, and reinforce a bridge. But when you think in terms of people it is necessary to think in terms of an “acting-with” mentality. We’re in this thing together. An “acting-upon” mentality is antithetical to Invitational Leadership.

In the television series *The Sopranos*, the lead character, Tony Soprano, is an extreme example of top-down, acting-upon management. Despite the occasional display of kindness and generosity toward associates, such leaders are of the command-and-control variety.

Any system of leadership that employs fear, duplicity, seduction, embarrassment, humiliation, ridicule, or subversion — regardless of good intentions or successful outcomes — cannot be viewed as Invitational Leadership. From an Invitational Leadership perspective, the ends do not justify the means.

The Power of Invitational Leadership

The power of Invitational Leadership can be monumental. Great and good leaders throughout history have believed that people have within themselves vast resources of strength, courage, and self-actualization. Successful leaders have discovered ways to invite others to share in the leaders’ vision, to look ahead to tomorrow’s promise.

There are countless examples of humans overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges when they are suitably invited to do so. Sidney Jourard, in his classic book, *The Transparent Self*, wrote: “There are no intellectual, social, physical, or psychological barriers that individuals cannot transcend provided they share the company of people who believe certain things, and who invite others to share in them.” This is a clarion call to recognize the relatively boundless potential of each person. To expect less is to diminish the human potential.

The Uniqueness of Invitational Leadership

Invitational Leadership differs significantly from past leadership theories and models because of its six overarching principles:

1. People are able, valuable, capable of responsibility, and should be treated accordingly.
2. Intentionality creates a culture of respect, optimism, and trust promoting positive social change.
3. Leadership is a cooperative and collaborative alliance where everyone matters.
4. Human potential, though sometimes not readily apparent, is always there, waiting for the invitation.
5. This potential can best be realized by leaders who intentionally invite the process.
6. Motivation is intrinsic; every human being is always motivated to maintain, protect, and enhance his or her perceived self-system.

These six guiding principles provide a consistent and reliable roadmap for optimal personal and professional living and leading.

The Stance

The concept of stance is useful here to indicate the typical or general position from which the leader operates and the leader's typical pattern of action. In baseball, a stance is the unique way a batter digs in to make solid contact with the ball. Baseball players develop a stance that is consistent and comfortable — a stance that makes it more likely that the batter will hit the ball. Likewise, the invitational leader develops and takes a consistent stance, even under harsh situations.

The Invitational Journey

Throughout our book we note that the journey of Invitational Leadership is a lifetime quest — one of continuous self-exploration and self-discovery. Indeed, all through our lives we are constantly coming to terms with who we are, how we live, and how we matter in our world. And we devoutly want to be about the things that really matter.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, a speaker came to the Kennesaw State University campus and related the following incident:

A man emerged on that fateful day from the rubble and ruin of the second tower, still clutching his briefcase, blanketed with dust and debris, clothes torn, his face covered with cuts. A policeman approached him and ordered, “Come with me, Sir. You are in a state of shock.” The man pulled himself up to his full height, stared for a moment at the policeman and replied, “I’m not in shock. I am fully cognizant for the first time in my life — fully cognizant of what really matters.” That sent a shiver through the audience; it set us all to thinking, to reflecting. How profound it must be to have that shock of recognition — to be fully aware of what truly matters, of what is really important in our lives.

At about the same time that the speaker came to campus, I was reading Carl Sandburg’s *Remembrance Rock*. In that novel, the protagonist goes once a year to this particular rock and asks himself three questions:

Who am I?

Where do I come from?

Where am I going?

Pondering these and like questions beckons us to turn within, to remove ourselves momentarily from the noise and clutter of everyday life — to go into our own silence to explore and discover, fully realizing the Greek imperative: *gnōthi seauton*, “know thyself.” The invitational leader comes to know him- or herself and then reaches out to others to help create for our world what the poet Alan Brownjohn refers to as the “Commonwealth of Decency” — a world wherein we honor diversity, pursue social justice, promote civil discourse, and treat each other with dignity and respect to serve the common good. Caring about each other and for each other may well be the noblest expression of our humanity.

Of course, the journey is yours. As the poet Walt Whitman reminds us, “Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you. You must travel it for yourself.” And as you travel that road, there will be many challenges to meet and choices to make — critical choices. The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre contends that we derive meaning and values through our decisions in everyday living. Further, we are free to make whatever choices we will — the only limitation to our freedom of choice is that we are *not free not to choose*. We *must* choose. And our choices are consequential, since they result in acts and behaviors that ultimately become who and

what we are; in short, choice becomes character. Free agents, we are responsible for creating the very purpose, meaning, and values in our lives through our choices.

To conclude, we have emphasized that Invitational Leadership has a significant personal component. To be truly inviting towards others, after all, we must be inviting toward ourselves. Now we would like to go back to our Remembrance Rock and ask an all-important fourth question: What meaning am I making of my life and work, and how can I help others to make meaning of their lives and work? For the invitational leader, answering that question is part of a lifelong process of joy, discovery, and human service.

Foundations of Invitational Leadership

“Leadership is a matter of how to be, not how to do. We spend most of our lives mastering how to do things, but in the end it is the quality and character of the individual that defines the performance of great leaders.”

—*Frances Hesselbein, Leader to Leader*

QUESTIONING WHAT GIVES our lives meaning and purpose is a process that should be taken quite seriously. Indeed, answering this question helps invitational leaders craft narratives of their personal and professional lives — stories that evolve as their ideas change, and as they themselves change, revealing ever-new possibilities for their careers and colleagues. Further, and perhaps most importantly, asking and answering such a question should be a natural extension of a continuous internal dialogue. This dialogue is a key component of what it requires to become an invitational leader. It is also central to the development of a positive and realistic self-concept.

Taking this type of searching inventory enables a leader become more consciously aware of him- or herself, and by so doing, take responsibility for how he or she defines that self. After all, if we perceive ourselves to be lacking in some fundamental leadership quality, then surely we will fail to move others to join our cause. But if we can learn to speak invitationally to ourselves — if how we speak to ourselves helps us define a largely optimistic self-concept — then the sense of possibility in our personal and professional lives will expand exponentially.

Our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world are so real to us that we seldom pause to question them. Yet, human behavior is always a

product of how we see ourselves and the situations in which we are involved. Although this fact seems obvious, the failure of people everywhere to comprehend it is responsible for much of human misunderstanding, maladjustment, conflict, and loneliness. In *Invitational Leadership*, being aware of, and questioning, our own perceptions is the first step in a re-visioning and re-calibrating of our relationships and responsibilities.

In Walker Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, narrator Binx Bolling discusses what he calls "repetitions" — "the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle." In other words, by recreating the past for himself, Binx is able to give it heightened meaning. This is but one of the ways Binx engages experience deliberately and thoughtfully. For instance, he might insist upon seeing a favorite movie in the exact manner in which he saw it the first time — even to the point of sitting in the same seat. By becoming hyper-aware of his actions, he avoids the general devaluation of repetitive experience. Or, as he puts it, he refuses to be defeated by the "malaise" of unquestioned existence.

Binx's existential approach to things can help us understand how leaders learn to think invitationally by first becoming aware of the possibility of doing so. Inspired by the knowledge of this possibility, we are able to step outside of ourselves and observe our behavior more clearly, re-evaluate our perceptions, and question how our actions and words become part and parcel of a larger vision of the world. Thus, we defeat the "malaise" of an unexamined life, turning toward a more joyful, thoughtful, and meaningful existence. This process begins with a deeper understanding of those three cornerstones of *Invitational Leadership*: the perceptual tradition, self-concept theory, and the "whispering self."

The Perceptual Tradition

The perceptual tradition is a way of understanding human behavior that takes into consideration all the ways in which we as humans are viewed, as well as how we view ourselves. The term perceptual refers not only to the senses but also to meanings — the personal significance of an event for the person experiencing it. These meanings extend far beyond sensory receptors to include such experiences as feelings, desires, aspirations, and hopes, as well as opinions about ourselves, others, and the world.

The starting point of the perceptual tradition is the assumption that we are conscious agents in the process of our own development. We

experience, interpret, construct, decide, act, and are ultimately responsible for our actions. Behavior is understood as a product of the way we see ourselves and the situations in which we find ourselves. Each individual is seen as an architect in the construction of his or her own development.

There are many scholars from numerous disciplines who have contributed to the perceptual tradition, and we would be remiss not to at least give them a mention here. In the late nineteenth century, William James, who pioneered this tradition, as well as the use of “stream of consciousness” as an introspective tool, described consciousness as the “function of knowing.” Building his work, George Herbert Mead’s perspective on the social nature of perception employed the concepts of “I” (self as subject) and “me” (self as object). Together they were classed, among a handful of others, as premier American pragmatists of the time.

In their 1959 book, Art Combs and Donald Snygg asserted in their theory of motivation that “the basic need of everyone is to preserve and enhance the phenomenal self,” or one’s view of him- or herself. Expanding on their theory, Carl Rogers’ work in the ‘70s emphasized the human condition as being in a constant process of becoming. And more recently, Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory postulates that social behavior can be learned by observing others. The contributions of these and other scholars and researchers continue to enrich our understanding of the power of perception in human affairs.

The perceptual tradition stands in contrast to other approaches that seek to understand human behavior by depicting it as basically a complex bundle of stimuli and responses, the product of a host of unconscious urges, or the result of genetic predispositions. In the perceptual tradition, primary importance is given to how people see themselves, others, and the world. Because of this emphasis on understanding people as they normally see things, the perceptual tradition seems well-suited as a cornerstone for Invitational Leadership.

Three assumptions of the perceptual tradition have particular meaning for Invitational Leadership: behavior is determined by perceptions, perceptions are learned, and perceptions can be reflected upon and modified.

Behavior Is Determined By Perceptions

The perceptual tradition seeks to explain why people do the things they do by postulating that human behavior is determined by, and pertinent to, the experience of the person at the moment of acting. In other words,

each individual behaves according to how the world appears at that instant. From this vantage point there is no such thing as illogical behavior — each person is behaving in the way that makes the most sense to him or her at a particular moment. What may seem *from an external point of view* as counterproductive and even self-destructive is only a function of what the world looks like from the viewpoint of the perceiving person at that moment of action.

When Richard Nixon proclaimed at a news conference, “I am not a crook,” and Sally Field shouted at the Academy Awards, “You like me, you *really* like me!” they received heavy ridicule from the press. Yet, at the moment of action, both were best stating their feelings from a most visceral and momentary place. No matter how strange or counterproductive the behavior of another person may appear, *from that person’s perception at the moment of action*, the behavior is seen as preferable to other actions he or she might take. We perceive what is relevant to our purposes and make our choices accordingly.

Fortunately, each person’s perceptual field can be continually enriched, expanded, and modified. This optimistic belief provides something to continually appreciate and reach for; it provides leaders with a jumping-off point for working collaboratively to extend the human experience, allowing them to enroll others in a shared, mutually inspiring vision of the future.

Perceptions Are Learned

Through a myriad of encounters with the world, particularly those with significant others, we develop certain fundamental perceptions that serve as organizing filters for making sense of the world. Without such a filtering system, we would be relentlessly bombarded by unrelated stimuli. Thus, perceptions serve as a reference point for behavior. Invitational Leadership is based on an understanding of, and respect for, peoples’ perceptual worlds. These perceptual worlds are not to be taken lightly, for they provide insights into human behavior.

Our perceptual worlds are formed in three general ways. The first is through a traumatic or extremely emotional event. A marriage, the joyous arrival of a baby, career successes or failures, an illness, retirement, or the loss of a loved one can have such impact that our perceptual world is forever changed. Imagine the emotional response spurred by a physician saying: “Your heart is not as strong as we would like it to be” or “I’m afraid your tests came back positive.” Just imagine receiving a registered

letter informing you that you have won thirty million dollars. Such information can turn our perceptual world upside down.

The second way that perceptions change is through a professional helping relationship, such as spiritual guidance, medical treatment, or professional counseling. We have all witnessed individuals who, through a religious conversion, medical or dental treatment, or professional counseling seem to change their perceptions of themselves, others, and the world. Psychotherapy can be a tremendous help for some individuals by assisting them to re-evaluate and reorganize their perceptual worlds.

The third, and by far the greatest influence on perceptions, takes place with repeated, everyday experiences and consistent events. Research has demonstrated that in business, workers who are consistently encouraged to participate in decision-making processes, or who are repeatedly excluded from such actions, will eventually see themselves as either valued participants or mindless drones. Everything that happens to us, good or bad, big or small, decent or indecent, has a life-long influence on the ways we perceive ourselves, others, and the world.

One further characteristic of our perceptual world is that it is a life-long process of learning. What we choose to perceive is determined by past experiences as mediated by present purposes and future expectations. Of all contemporary theories and models of leadership, none depends more on individual perceptions than does Invitational Leadership. Because perceptions are learned, they offer infinite capacity for positive change and the realization of human potential.

Perceptions Can Be Reflected Upon

The ability to examine and monitor our perceptions is essential to Invitational Leadership. Being aware of past and present perceptions and being able to imagine future possibilities permits the development of a deeper level of understanding of self, others, and the world. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, former head the University of Chicago's Department of Psychology pointed out, reflection can lead a person to develop a more differentiated and integrated self; that is, a personality with many creatively harmonized interests..

Reflection also provides optimism because there is no inevitable future as long as we have the power to examine our lives. Although we cannot change the past, we can change our perceptions of previous events and consequently open more possibilities for the future. Such introspection

goes beyond “I feel”; it is also “I think,” “I know,” “I reflect,” “I monitor,” and “I imagine.” At this point, real change becomes possible.

So far, we have emphasized that people behave according to how they see things. We explained that these perceptions are learned and can be reflected upon. Now we come to that paramount perception of personal existence: the self-concept.

Self-Concept

The concept of self has dominated the thinking of American scholars for many decades. In their review of the literature regarding self, social psychologists Banaji and Prentice reported finding more than 5,000 books, monographs, and articles on the subject. Obviously, our overview of self-concept will be restricted to its relationship to Invitational Leadership.

Of all perceptions, none seems to affect our search for personal significance and identity more than our self-concept — our awareness of our own personal existence and how we fit into the world. In our own research we have also concluded, as other theorists above, that the maintenance, protection, and enhancement of the perceived self is the basic motive behind all human behavior. Use of this assumption, organized into what is generally known as self-concept theory, helps to clarify and integrate seemingly unrelated aspects of human behavior. For example, individuals who see themselves as leaders are likely to respond by providing direction in difficult situations, just as soldiers who see themselves as defeated are likely to run from battle. The dynamics are the same, even if the resulting behaviors are sharply different.

One of the most interesting aspects of self-concept is that it has an innate integrity. If a new idea is congruent with beliefs already present in the self-concept, it is easily assimilated. If the new conception has no relevance, it is ignored; and if it is in opposition with other beliefs already present, it is immediately rejected. This organized self is worth considering more closely.

The Organized Self

Most researchers agree that a person's self-concept has a generally stable quality that is characterized by internal orderliness and harmony. It is not simply a hodgepodge of cognitions and feelings. The self-concept is orchestrated and balanced, centered on the “I” that represents immediate awareness of existence. In addition to the “I,” the self-concept contains smaller units. These can be thought of as “sub-selves” and represent the

self-as-object. These are the varied multitude of “me’s” that are the objects of our self-perceptions. Each of the “me” sub-selves contains its own balance and voice, and each influences, and is in turn influenced by the global self-concept.

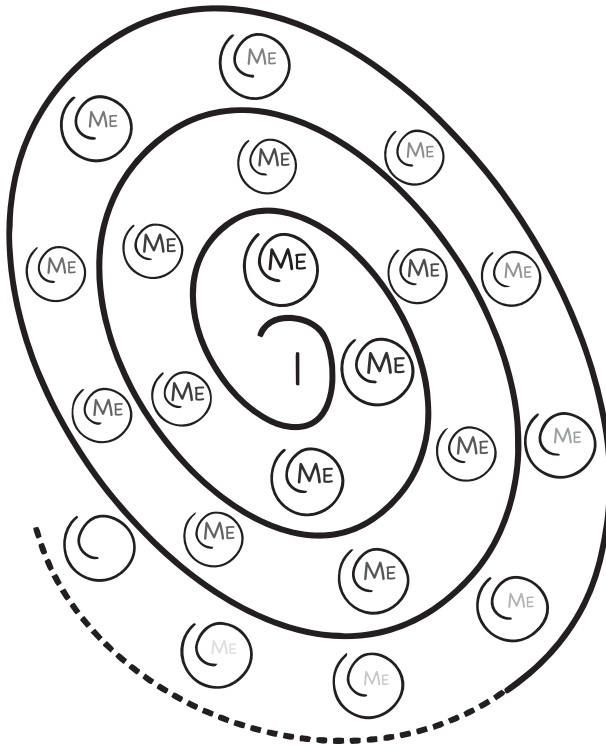
During most of the previous century, self-concept was viewed as a unitary, monolithic entity, usually centered on self-esteem. In contrast, more contemporary thinking sees self-concept as a multifaceted, dynamic, and many-layered construct of amazing complexity. As W. Somerset Maugham noted in his 1940s novel, *The Razor’s Edge*, many individuals live within us, often in uneasy companionship with one another.

Each person maintains countless perceptions regarding his or her personal existence, and each perception is internally orchestrated with all the others. This is what gives consistency to the human personality. The organized quality of self-concept has corollaries:

- Self-concept requires stability and tends to resist change. If the self-concept changed readily, the individual would lack a consistent and dependable personality.
- At the heart of self-concept is the self-as-doer, the “I” which is distinct from the self-as-object, the various “me’s.” This allows the person to reflect on past events, analyze present perceptions, and shape future experiences.
- The more central a particular belief is within one’s self-concept (the closer the “me” to the “I”) the more resistant the person is to changing that belief.

To picture the global self-concept with its internal symmetry, imagine that a large spiral represents the organized unity of one’s self-concept. The numerous “me” sub-selves can be roughly divided into *attributes* (strong, tall, loyal, short, bright, young, bashful, friendly, faithful, trustworthy, responsible, loyal, helpful, sexy, etc.) and *categories* (student, leader, husband, mother, atheist, athlete, spouse, Muslim, Jew, Christian, homosexual, veteran, American, etc.). These perceived attributes and categories are often linked (bright student, loyal American, faithful spouse, responsible administrator, etc.) and are internally positioned in a hierarchical order. This order is critical, for it gives meaning and stability to the self.

Each person’s self-concept contains countless *me’s*, but not all are equally significant. Some are highly important and are close to the center



of the self-concept. Other *me's* are less central and are located toward the periphery. The *me's* closest to the “I” have the most influence on and authority over daily functioning. In other words, they “have the king’s ear.”

It may also be helpful to think of the self-concept as a stabilizing lake. This lake is constantly fed by a river of experience that flows into the lake at one end and exits at the other. The river of *me's* can flow into the self-concept lake rapidly or slowly, depending on life experiences, and can provide much or little fresh water. In the healthy personality, the river dependably provides the lake with a manageable number of fresh *me's*, whereas outmoded *me's* are flushed out of the lake and down the river. When this life-long process of renewal and development is interrupted, and little water is allowed to enter or leave, the lake becomes stagnant. Conversely, if too much water enters or leaves the lake, it becomes flooded or drained, unpredictable, and provides too little protection against the vagaries of life. When too many *me's* strive for attention, the leader can lose self-direction and integrity. Where there are too few *me's*, the individual begins to lose his or her identity and even his or her perceived existence.

Development of Self

No one is born with a self-concept. The development and structure of self-awareness is a lifelong research project. It is a continuous process of learning. By experiencing the world through countless inviting and disinviting interactions, we gradually develop a theory of personal existence. Thanks to the plethora of interactions our world provides, a self-concept is forged, complete with a complex hierarchy of attributes and categories.

These repeated experiences, positive or negative, have a profound effect on the self. Referencing W. Somerset Maugham once again, this gradual process is expressed beautifully in *The Razor's Edge*:

For men and women are not only themselves; they are also the region in which they were born, the city apartment or the farm in which they learned to walk, the games they played as children, the old wives' tale they overheard, the food they ate, the schools they attended, the sports they followed, the poems they read, and the God they believed in.

Everything that happens to us happens forever. Although it is impossible to change the past, it is possible to change our perceptions of past experiences, control our present activities, and imagine and act on future possibilities.

Self-Concept as Guidance System

As we've seen, self-concept is a complex, continuously active system of subjective and learned beliefs regarding our personal experience. It serves as a reference point for behavior and enables us to assume particular roles in life — we act in accordance with the ways we have learned to see ourselves. From a lifetime of studying our own actions and those of others, we acquire expectations about that which seems to agree with our self-concept already in place. As mentioned earlier, if a new perception is consistent with past experiences already incorporated into our self-concept, we easily accept and assimilate the new perception. If the new experience contradicts those already incorporated, we will probably reject it.

The nature of self-concept is a continuously active system that dependably points toward the “true north” of a person's perceived existence. This guidance system not only shapes the ways a person views him- or herself, others, and the world, but it also serves to direct action and enables each person to take a consistent “stance” in life. This

consistency is perhaps most important in relation to internal dialogue — the ways we bolster our self-concept through conversations with the “whispering self.”

The Whispering Self

A third, vital cornerstone for Invitational Leadership is a particular thought process which we have named the “whispering self.” This inner voice is the internal monologue or dialogue that sounds off in our heads the moment we think about something. It is this internally audible voice that we listen to in our heads, which in turn influences what we do as leaders.

According to A.N. Sokolov, expert in the study of the power of internal dialogue, in all instances, people think, remember, and imagine through the use of private conversation: “Inner speech is nothing but speech to oneself, or concealed verbalization, which is instrumental in the logical processing of sensory data, in their realization and comprehension within a definite system of concepts and judgments.” Leaders who are aware that they talk to themselves are in a much better position to monitor and alter their inner voices. Those who are unaware of the whispering self have lost control of it. It is vital to be aware of our internal dialogue and to know where these voices lead.

The whispering self is the narrator who at every waking moment of our lives tells us who we are and what we should be about. In attempting to solve problems, make decisions, select a course of action, or understand a situation, we enter into internal dialogue with ourselves. During these inner conversations we look at options, consider their results, and then select what appears to be the best and safest course of action based on our internal constructions. Sometimes these constructions can be counter-productive. The following story was provided by our friend Bill Stafford:

A young man was driving his girlfriend home to the suburbs after an evening out. On his return trip back into the city, he had a flat tire in a remote section of the highway. When he went to get the car jack, he remembered he had taken it out of the car and had not replaced it. He recalled that there was a farm house about a half-mile away, and even though it was late at night he decided to walk to the farm house to borrow a jack from the farmer. As he walked he kept talking to himself about how angry the awakened farmer would be and how dumb he would feel for even asking. His self-talk continued as he walked up the path to the front door.

He knocked on the door loudly, and the upstairs room lit up. The farmer leaned out the window and shouted: “What do you want?” The young man’s reply was immediate: “Keep your damned jack! I’ll figure out another way to fix my tire.”

Internal dialogue can be productive or counterproductive.

As highly esteemed behavioral researcher Shad Helmstetter explains, all of us talk to ourselves all the time. We are thinking machines that never shut down: “At times our self-talk comes in feelings that can’t quite be put into words. At other times it comes in little flashes, flickers of thought which never quite catch fire or glow bright enough or last long enough to become ideas, clearly thought out and understood.” *It is this inner voice that allows us to respond to and actively manipulate both our internal and external environments.*

The more intentional our thinking, as measured by clearly articulated, internal dialogue, the more likely it is to be acted upon. This hypothesis has been supported in our own research, with the help of our esteemed associates Stacy Hockaday and Keith Davis. Together, we found that by re-framing general, internal cognitions into clearly stated internal dialogue, individuals are in a better position to reach their goals and are more likely to do so.

Surprisingly, internal dialogue is that part of human consciousness that has been neglected by those who have written about leadership. Far more books have been written about understanding and controlling the outer world than on how to understand and control the inner self. The fact that internal cognitions serve as a guide for action has been largely overlooked. The whispering self seeks to fill this void. *Invitational Leadership is in large part the product of internal dialogue regarding what we say to ourselves, about ourselves, others, and the world.*

Defining the Whispering Self

Many names have been used to describe this hushed inner voice, including: self-talk, internal dialogue, inner-conversations, self-referent thought, concealed verbalizations, private speech, intro-communication, inner voice, personal cognitions, self-statements, and covert conversation. But whatever term we ascribe to this inner speech, it is clear that the whispering self is a vital part of the total thinking process in human consciousness. It arises the moment we think of something, most often with the aid of language to articulate it.

Carlos Castaneda, in his book *A Separate Reality*, explains the nature of the whispering self this way: “The world is such-and-such or so-and-so because we tell ourselves that is the way it is . . . you talk to yourself. You’re not unique in that. Every one of us does that. We carry on internal talk . . . in fact we maintain our world with our internal talk.” In a very special way each person is both subject and object. The whispering self is both speaker and listener.

A graphic description of how the whispering serves as both subject and object, speaker and listener, was provided by Steven Callahan, who was adrift for seventy-six days on a tiny float following the sinking of his sailboat. Here is how Callahan, alone in a vast ocean, described talking to and listening to himself: “Maintaining discipline becomes more difficult each day. My fearsome and fearful crew mutter mutinous misgivings within the fo’c’s’le of my head. Their spokesman yells at me. ‘Water, Captain! We need more water. Would you have us die here, so close to port? What is a pint or two? We’ll soon be in port. We can surely spare a pint. . . .’ ‘Shut up!’ I order. ‘We don’t know how close we are, might have to last to the Bahamas. Now, get back to work.’” This saga describes how a brave man’s determined intentionality in the face of insurmountable hardships leads to eventual rescue.

The way we use language — and the language we use — gives structure to our perceptual worlds. Although thinking can occur without language, the words we use greatly enhance thinking and influence behavior. Simply stated, *the way to change the self is to change the self’s internal dialogue.*

Internal dialogue seems so commonplace that it is almost akin to background music. Yet this inner voice is a potent force for good and ill, for it guides and controls overt behavior. As Csikszentmihalyi explained, “People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us come to being happy.” It is thought escaping into the open where it can be crystallized into recognizable self-talk and evaluated for its positive or negative messages. By listening and controlling this subtle inner narration, Invitational Leadership reveals itself.

Healthy and Unhealthy Whispers

The whispering self can be our dear friend or mortal enemy. No one is immune to this constructive or destructive voice. Sometimes this hushed inner voice is accurate and rational. At other times it speaks in innuendo, half-truths, and gets lost in irrationality.

HEALTHY WHISPERS

In a healthy person the internal whispers are highly beneficial. They murmur of success, assurance, fulfillment, and provide a large measure of control over both feelings and actions. Scholars who have written about the nature of the self generally agree that individuals who define themselves in essentially positive ways tend to be open to experience, are more willing to disclose their feelings and face the world with confidence and assurance. In the healthy individual this positive inner voice is moderated by realistic assessment. An example of positive and realistic internal dialogue was shared by a friend:

I used to think that I was a failure if I did not have a big home, fine car, and money in the bank. Now I realize that I may never have these things, and that's O.K. I have many other things that make me a success, including good health, dear friends, and a loving family.

Another friend commented:

After not getting a new position, I became very depressed. I felt that I must have done something wrong during the interview not to have gotten the promotion. I kept thinking to myself that I had messed up. My wife suggested that it is entirely possible that I could have had a great interview and still not have gotten the position. Perhaps the person chosen just had more experience. This thought helped me to think about the situation in a whole new light.

Growing numbers of research studies have identified the beneficial effects of positive belief systems manifested in self-talk. The research of Scheier and Carver, Seligman, and others suggests that an optimistic belief system results in better academic performance in the classroom, better performance on the athletic field, and better physical health.

A delightfully optimistic approach to life was portrayed in *Life With Father* by Clarence Day: "Father declared he was going to buy a new plot in the cemetery, a plot all for himself. 'And I'll buy on a corner,' he added triumphantly, 'where I can get out!' Mother looked at him, startled but admiring and whispered to me, 'I almost believe he could do it,'" Father's upbeat, optimistic outlook on life and beyond serves as an example of invitational thinking in action.

Here are some examples of healthy self-talk:

“There are some things that I’m not good at.”

“I enjoy challenges.”

“I like the way I look.”

“I trust my feelings.”

“I’m a responsible person.”

“I’ve got a good head on my shoulders.”

“I’m optimistic about the future.”

“I find some things difficult.”

“Most people like me.”

“I respect myself.”

These comments reflect a positive and realistic view of one’s existence. The voice of the self speaks of positive capabilities, coupled with reasonable cautions against being overly optimistic.

UNHEALTHY WHISPERS

The unhealthy internal voice discourages feelings of confidence and efficacy. This lurking voice can inform us that things are more difficult than they really are while reminding us that we lack the ability to understand and solve problems. It speaks of fear, anxiety, worthlessness, and defeat.

According to clinical psychologist Robert W. Firestone: “Everyone has negative voices — we would not be human without them, but people who are self-destructive have negative voices that dominate their thinking and block the ability to think positively or even rationally. These voices create a person who is essentially turned against oneself. When faced with failure, rejection, illness, loss, or shame, this person has the potential to take action against himself or herself.” In the extreme case of suicide, this self-hatred reaches epic proportions. As Shakespeare writes in *MacBeth*, “Foul whisperings are abroad.” A foul inner voice can suggest that life is pointless and that the individual is powerless to do anything about it. As important as is positive and realistic internal dialogue, *it is even more important to be aware of the damage inflicted by negative and distorted inner conversations.*

In the field of medicine, the axiom is “first do no harm.” In invitational thinking, the axiom is “eliminate the negative and distorted.”

Many people tell themselves that they cannot learn, assert, or succeed, even when such things are not objectively true. They encounter difficulties because they are incapable of telling themselves that they can succeed. The presence of negative and distorted self-talk establishes limits and barriers to performance, and these limits and barriers are as real as this book.

Listen to the voice of one young man in therapy: “Doubting myself has become a way of life for me. When I turn in a paper I tell myself it’s no good. When I ask a girl for a date, I know I’ll be turned down. When I apply for a job, I know I won’t get it.” Such negative self-talk often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Individuals who expect rejection, failure, and defeat become their own worst enemies, often sabotaging themselves.

The whispering self has profound effects not only on social behavior but also on biology. Research by Kiecolt-Glaser, Ricker, Messick, Speicher, Garner, and Glaser in psychosomatic medicine documented the connections between physical immune functions and self-definitions. Working to alter faulty, irrational, or negative self-talk is an important prerequisite not only for leadership but for a healthy life as well.

Imagine an aspiring leader whose whispering self tells him or her the following:

“I’m always putting my foot in my mouth.”

“I never know what to say.”

“I can never remember names.”

“I’ve never been any good with numbers.”

“I can’t use computers.”

“I can’t speak in public.”

“I don’t think people like me.”

“I wish I were better looking.”

“I’d lose my head if it weren’t attached.”

It would be difficult if not impossible to achieve much of anything while listening to an inner voice filled with pessimism, self-doubt, and even self-hatred. The language we use internally forms the structure of our consciousness. Changing the ways we speak to ourselves internally changes the very meaning of our existence.

A classic example of distorted and self-defeating thinking was provided by Ken Kesey in his 1962 novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*:

“Man, you’re talking like a fool! You mean to tell me that you’re gonna’ sit back and let some old blue-haired woman talk you into being a rabbit?”

“Not talk me into it, no. I was born a rabbit. Just look at me. I simply need the nurse to make me happy with my role.”

“You’re no damned rabbit.”

By accepting ourselves as a rabbit, or loser, clumsy, ugly, stupid, lazy, or incompetent, our inner voice becomes its own defender, regardless of how ultimately self-defeating the defense may be. The defense against failure is to accept oneself as a failure. The negative voice declares that it is better not to try than to try and be embarrassed or humiliated. By not trying, we maintain some sort of control.

To illustrate how the whispering self can function in positive and realistic ways, consider the following description of internal dialogue provided by one of our doctoral students:

I often talk to myself in two ways. First, I talk out arguments with myself before I present them to other people. This helps me organize my thoughts and, I hope, appear more polished when I present my thoughts to others. Second, I often ‘play out’ difficult situations afterwards to better understand what went wrong in the interaction. In the privacy of my mind, I can say what I should have said at the time and did not. It’s almost like talking to a friend.

In everyday life, we formulate various courses of action, select what appears to be the most self-enhancing, and critique results.

A successful way to handle stress and reduce anxiety is to challenge negative and distorted self-talk. Again, it is this private talk which defines who we are and what we can and cannot do. The goal is to adjust internal dialogue with external reality, to be aware of negative and distorted self-talk, and to ask ourselves, “What is the evidence for my conclusions?”

An approach widely used in professional counseling and psychotherapy is called “rational therapy.” The purpose of this tactic is to change negative and dysfunctional self-talk to more rational and positive inner conversations. This requires that we become aware of self-talk and

challenge those hushed voices that are self-defeating. When our thinking is dominated by irrationality, irrational things happen to us. *It is not as important to speak to ourselves with affirming words as it is to recognize and challenge faulty, irrational, counterproductive self-talk.*

From Self to Others

Throughout this chapter there has been an implicit subtext that is crucial to the development of the invitational leader — namely, how we feel about ourselves has a profound impact on how we interact with others.

The intentionally inviting leader, one who is guided by a healthy, optimistic self-concept, frees others to feel as positively about themselves as he or she does. After all, how we interact with others is really a reflection of how we interact with ourselves. The invitational leader speaks in encouraging, positive tones, echoing what he hears when he listens carefully to his or her own whispering self.

It should come as no surprise that listening to ourselves and others is one of the keys to developing a healthy self-concept. Just as listening to the self helps us to monitor our self-talk for negative or unhealthy whispers, so listening closely to our colleagues enables us to understand differences in thinking styles and personalities. Listening to the self and listening to others — these are not always separate actions, for they often happen simultaneously. One listens to the whispering self in determining how best to approach each colleague, and then monitors the interaction as it takes place, seeking to be as constructive and encouraging as possible.

It should be clear by now that the invitational leader's self-concept is crucial. Think, for instance, what would happen to the leader with a negative self-concept. How can negative thoughts about the self do anything but interfere with our relationships with others? How can the leader learn to engage others if he or she does not first learn to engage in confident and healthy self-talk? Further, what good is positive self-talk if the invitational leader does not treat colleagues and their opinions with respect? Consider what Robert Greenleaf, an authority on the topic of servant leadership, writes about respectful listening:

Most of us, at one time or another, some of us a good deal of the time, would really like to communicate, really get through to the level of meaning rooted in the listener's experience. It can be terribly important. The best test of whether we are communicating at this depth is to ask ourselves, first, are we really

listening? Are we listening to the one we want to communicate to? Is our basic attitude, as we approach the confrontation, one of wanting to understand? Remember that great line from the prayer of Saint Francis: “Lord, grant that I may not seek so much to be understood as to understand.”

Understanding begins with the self: Are we able to comprehend our own motivations and desires, and can we recognize and revise negative internal dialogue? But such self-knowledge has broader implications for the ways in which we relate to others. Indeed, if we are really listening to ourselves, then we should be able to listen with equal concentration, respect, and interest to our colleagues. Heresy though it might be to do so, we might alter the prayer of Saint Francis: *Lord, grant that I may truly understand myself, and therefore learn to understand others.*

A posture of seeking to understand ourselves and our place in the world is the stance of the invitational leader. The stakes of such understanding are high. We turn again to Greenleaf: “I submit, with respect to purpose, that no person is to be trusted with any aim unless he or she has some contact, however tenuous, with ultimate purpose.” The invitational leader has contact with his or her ultimate purpose of being a beneficial presence. This requires the soul-searching necessary to lead others toward greatness. More importantly, this leader will seek to inspire the same kind of search for meaning in his or her colleagues and, by setting a positive example through words and actions, will have a very real possibility of succeeding. At the highest level, then, the stakes of Invitational Leadership are nothing less than what Walt Whitman calls the “progress of souls.”