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■ GREAT LEADERSHIP
CHANGES EVERYTHING

TIM IRWIN, PH.D.

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*Great Leadership
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CHAPTER 1

MAKE AN IMPACT

*“Guard your heart above all else,
for it determines the course of your life.”¹*

—ANCIENT PROVERB

The outcome hung in desperate uncertainty. Whichever side won this battle would certainly win the war, and an obscure colonel unknowingly held the key to the now-famous battle.

Several weeks earlier, 120 members of the Second Maine Infantry Regiment laid down their arms in protest when a small group of their fellow soldiers were discharged from active service. Because of bureaucratic bungling some soldiers were mistakenly enrolled for a two-year enlistment and others for three. The three-year enlistees wanted the same treatment as their fellow soldiers, but the government would not permit them to be discharged from the army and return home. Filled with indignation, the men refused to fight. One officer declared them mutineers and wanted them shot. What their exact punishment would be remained in question, but for now they were detained as prisoners. The men from the Second Maine marched under guard to the camp of the Twentieth Maine regiment.

The conditions in the camp can only be described as dismal. The Twentieth, which originally formed with 1,621 soldiers, had suffered massive casualties and now fielded only 266 men. These remaining men were

fatigued and sick, and some were wounded. The regiment remained critically short-staffed—the last thing they needed was to devote precious troops to guarding members of their own army. In fact, they urgently needed these 120 battle-hardened veterans to strengthen their depleted ranks and join them as comrades instead of prisoners.²

The colonel leading the Twentieth Maine regiment assumed charge of the prisoners and sought to rekindle their commitment to the North's cause. In a quiet, yet heartfelt and deeply personal speech, portrayed in the film *Gettysburg*, Colonel Chamberlain reminded the men why the Union army was fighting: not for money or land or personal advancement, but rather for the noble cause of setting other men free. The mutineers intently studied the face of the colonel and listened to his message. Slowly, all but four soldiers stood to convey their willingness to follow this man and to join in the fight.³

And so it was on July 1, 1863, that these two Maine regiments of Union soldiers set out together toward Gettysburg to risk their lives for a greater cause. The men's resolve and strength would be tested to the limit on day two of the battle in south-central Pennsylvania in a clamor to hold the vulnerable left flank. The Fifteenth Alabama Infantry Regiment, fully aware of the strategic importance of breaching the left flank of the Union line, bravely assaulted the hill again and again only to be thrown back.

The Union cannons and muskets fired down on the Fifteenth Alabama from behind large granite boulders that created a natural stronghold called Little Round Top. Acrid smoke from exploding black powder hung thick in the air. Savage screams from men killing one another at close range seemed darkly incongruent with the beauty of the rolling hills. The Twentieth Maine soldiers felt unspeakable dread, but they knew that if the Union's left flank collapsed, the North's line would certainly fail, and the battle would be catastrophically lost.

Colonel Chamberlain's troops, exhausted from holding off the repeated attacks on Little Round Top, ran out of ammunition. Chamberlain instinctively knew that they could not withstand another assault on their position. He was certain they must do something different, and he quickly

revealed to his officers a new plan. They were to go on the offense, affix bayonets to their rifles, and move down the hill. The far left flank, which had almost doubled back on itself from the repeated attacks, would then swing around like a barn door. They needed to drive the Confederate forces back down the slopes of Little Round Top. The junior officers, clearly uncertain about this untested battle tactic, nonetheless trusted their leader. Sword drawn, the colonel led the assault down the hill.

Chamberlain and his forces drove the Confederates back, and the infamous Pickett's Charge near the center of the North's line became the focus of the battle. Union soldiers on a high ridge routed the Confederate troops as they attempted to cross a huge open field. The North won the Battle of Gettysburg, and it proved to be a crucial domino in the final campaign to end the war. Historians generally agree that if the South had prevailed in this battle, the nation would be strikingly different today.

THE POWER OF PURPOSE

Lacking the background you would expect in a military commander, Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain was a sedentary thirty-four-year-old former college professor of modern languages from a family of strict moral values. Yet this inspirational, unflinching, quick-thinking leader changed the world forever. Recipient of the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions in the battle of Little Round Top, Colonel Chamberlain demonstrated great leadership before the first bayonet was fixed and the first shot was fired. The pivotal moment occurred when he reminded the 120 mutineers of the nobility of their cause. This quiet and unassuming colonel possessed the authority to deal harshly with these mutineers, but his earnest appeal persuaded these men to reenlist voluntarily in the heroic effort.⁴ They yielded their frustrations and longings to go home and instead joined up with the Twentieth Maine Regiment. The additional numbers of these experienced troops made the difference in maintaining the left flank of the Union Army at Little Round Top. Each soldier rallied to the cause

and collectively stood shoulder-to-shoulder against insurmountable odds. Many paid the ultimate price.

Why did the mutineers change their minds and do what they had firmly vowed not to do? Chamberlain intuitively understood that he could not *command* the level of commitment needed to endure the sacrifices these men would be called to make. He told them that even though he had the authority to confine or even execute them, he would not. Their re-enlistment must be voluntary. Chamberlain's appeal was effective because they saw in him a unique intermingling of authenticity, humility, self-discipline, and courage.

Because of these attributes and the resulting trust the mutineers felt for him, Chamberlain rekindled their conviction about the purpose for which they were fighting. Chamberlain's impact was tied directly to the soldiers' response to who he was as a person.

He inspired the men to rise above their resentment of the government and their miserable circumstances, homesickness, and fear. The mutineers' hearts and minds were transformed as Chamberlain fanned the embers of a higher sense of calling and purpose.

Beyond their obvious desire to go be with their families and resume their regular lives, he knew that many cherished a desire to serve a noble purpose. Like most of us, they wanted to be a part of a group that was making a difference and to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Chamberlain's speech pointed the way for an honorable resolution, and they would never be the same again.

THE PERSON OF THE LEADER



Inspiring others to give themselves unreservedly to the mission is not a management technique. Effective leadership is far more personal. Followers size us up as people to see if they want to follow our leadership or simply comply with our directives.

Followers want to know that the aim toward which they move is important and meaningful. Even in the military and the corporate world, which remain organizationally hierarchical, people follow leaders with high commitment only when the leader is profoundly trustworthy and when he or she pursues a clear and compelling purpose.

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OUR OWN NEED FOR MEANING

We understand this desire to make an impact because we experience this need ourselves. We want to believe our lives count for something more than fighting gridlocked freeways and making it from paycheck to paycheck. In moments of quiet reflection we ask ourselves, “Is it really possible for our lives to make a difference?” When it is not apparent that we can, we feel anguish.

Steve Jobs put our need for impact in contemporary terms. “We’re here to put a dent in the universe.”⁵

“We’re here to put a dent in the universe.”

—STEVE JOBS

Do you remember how you felt when it was announced that Steve Jobs had died? I don’t know about you, but I felt sadness. We probably didn’t pause to analyze how he had transformed computers, movies, music, phones, how we buy computers, packaging, and so much more. No doubt

Steve Jobs will be remembered for all that and as one of the most influential leaders of the twenty-first century; however, our collective reaction was much more emotional. We missed him.

Despite his well-documented rough edges, we knew that he loved his family, and we admired his passion for excellence. We marveled that a leader could create such an impact on the world. We admired his comeback from being fired in 1985 to bringing the company roaring back from the brink of bankruptcy in 1997. It amazed us that just over a decade later, the company became the world's most highly valued corporate asset.

Our collective grief was not about Apple the company but rather about Jobs the man. We missed him and his ability to wow us again and again. We felt regret that the world too seldom gives us someone who inspires us and models the relentless pursuit of vision. We instinctively knew that, for Jobs, making something that was beautiful and yet solved real problems was more important than profits. This buoyed our faith that work could, in fact, be meaningful.

During Jobs' time at Apple, his employees had the same everyday problems we do; however, they instinctively trusted Jobs, and the power of his purpose shifted the plane of their perspective. Jobs constantly reminded them of the noble cause of their effort, and their daily problems seemed small in comparison.

Jobs' biggest gift may have been to give us hope that we, too, can make our own dent in the universe. We may not possess the creative genius or brazen determination of Steve Jobs, but his example makes us at least consider how we could make a difference in our own sphere of influence. In those quiet moments of reflection, we long for a way to get started and make an impact in some significant way.

THE CERTAIN BARRIERS

In my many years as an organizational psychologist and management consultant, I have had the privilege of working with thousands of people in hundreds of organizations around the world. When I ask leaders about

their aspirations, it is fairly common for them to acknowledge that they want more challenge, responsibility, recognition, and advancement. They seek stimulating work that they look forward to accomplishing. Many also acknowledge that *they long to make an impact with their work*. Of course, they want to move forward in their careers, to have bigger jobs, to make more money, etc.; but down deep, they really want to make a positive difference and to have their lives count for something more purposeful than simply making a living. My guess is that you are no different. You, too, want to get ahead, but you also aspire to be the kind of leader who, like Chamberlain or Jobs, inspires others to give themselves unreservedly to the organization's mission and to make a meaningful difference.

In the pursuit of making an impact, we inevitably collide with barriers. One is simply the ruts we get into in everyday life. Our lives are very daily, and the mundane obligations of paying the mortgage or getting a roof leak repaired diminish our hopes and dreams and distract us from a higher purpose. "Dailyness" can quench any noble aspirations we might be nurturing.

We sometimes anesthetize our yearning for meaning and purpose with frenetic activities or addiction to the superficial, but the feeling keeps finding its way back into our awareness. An inspiring movie, a beautiful video about the wonders of the planet, a story about someone who made a difference, or anything that shifts the plane of our perspective can fuel that hope in us.

Another barrier is that when we look around our own organization, we do not see many leaders having much of an impact. There are not many role models. We wonder why is it that those who have the most power, often have the least impact. We see many of the leaders in our organization managing a bunch of stuff—just organizing the daily rat race. Very few leaders realize their aspirations. Most finish short of the vision with which they began their careers. Instead, somewhere along the line many began working for money instead of for meaning. They sought a safe retirement instead of having a meaningful impact. Some actually went off the rails, but most were simply dead on the tracks.

A DIFFERENT ENDING

Great leaders who leave a powerful legacy are not somehow less vulnerable to these same barriers we face. The critical question is what makes them so different?

My purpose in writing this book is to help you overcome your barriers and to give you the tools to script an incredibly better narrative. If you read and apply the principles of this book you will realize those aspirations deep inside you to create a lasting legacy. I promise that you will make an impact—the hope of every great leader.

The person inside us (our core) determines more than anything our ability to make an impact. In the chapters ahead we will learn what our core is and how to grow and protect our core, the key to achieving that hope within us!



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BY TIM IRWIN, PH.D.

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