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Frederick Douglass: Lessons of Motivation and Leadership

By Frank Ghannadian, Ph.D., Dean, Sykes College of Business and Thomas Witherspoon, Ed.D, Chief Diversity Officer



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Frederick Douglass is famously known for stating “the soul that is within men no man can degrade.” These words operated as a guidepost for how Douglass navigated personally and as a leader. Douglass’s fight for justice and equality for all continues even today over a 130 years after his death. Douglass was a slave, abolitionist, recruiter for the Union Army and a prolific writer. The information most known about Frederick Douglass’s life comes from his autobiography: *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). This autobiography captures his life’s journey through slavery to freedom while fighting to achieve basic dignity in a country that was full of prejudice and hate against people of color. People had heard about the brutal treatment of slaves but did not know the reality of how bad it truly was until they read about it in Douglass’s autobiography. The inhumane conditions that slaves endured written in Douglass’s diaries woke up the country to the misery of an economic system that thrived on cruelty and misery of the slaves in favor of the white masters who ran the economic machine of the era. Through Douglass’s reflections we learn about his leadership talent which was governed by the tenets of confidence, selflessness and emotional stability.

Douglass born a slave in 1818, at a time when America was a young country only 30 years old. The country had just doubled in size due to the Louisiana Purchase by Thomas Jefferson. Douglass ran away from his masters and changed his name in fear of being captured and eventually

escaped to England where he was later freed as a result of a payment of \$800 to his latest master. Three pivotal situations aided Douglass with his escape and eventual freedom. First, he learned to read as a young boy and continued to hone the skill even when forbidden. Second, as a young slave on loan, Douglass fought back against the most feared slave driver in his area and was never touched by him again. Lastly, Douglass married a free black woman who was instrumental in his escape, his writing and his leadership.

During the Civil War, Douglass met with Abraham Lincoln after the emancipation proclamation and was instrumental in recruiting African Americans to fight in the Civil War. He believed this show of patriotism by African Americans would justify their right of citizenship. Douglass also lobbied for equal pay and equal advancements for the black recruits. The mid-19th century was a tough time for the U.S and the world as Europe was also going through the industrial revolution and labor issues and relations was becoming a growing issue. Longer essays and many books have been written about Frederick Douglass but what we can learn from Douglass that applies to today’s leaders in our opinion is below:

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Frederick Douglass: Lessons of Motivation and Leadership

Douglass was an insistent leader. Despite circumstances, born enslaved and parentless, Douglass was persistent and used every experience as a learning moment of growth. Douglass said he could not understand how a human can be so cruel to another human.

Douglass took advantage of personal development. Douglass knew that learning to read and write would open the door to another world. Books and the ability to communicate were essential. Well-developed leaders help organizations achieve optimal results for the greater good.

Douglass choose practicality over idealistic theories. Many advocated ending slavery with violence. Douglass understood that a violent revolt alone could make slavery worse. The Civil War eventually ended slavery, but it did not end racism in the U.S. Douglass understood that more was needed to be done to change the norms of a country, which could not be accomplished through force alone. Leaders today understand that balance is needed to enact true change.

Douglass showed courage in the face of danger. Douglass knew that even with danger he had to tell the truth about slavery and the misery it brought to millions. Douglass braved the chance of being caught and sent back to the South or being killed. Douglass teaches leaders of today the importance of utilizing courage that bends toward the arc of truth and justice ultimately wins.

Douglass not only demonstrated physical courage but moral courage as well. At great personal risk, his fight against slavery showed his courage. In 1852, Douglass risked his own personal safety when he -- with 4 million people currently held as slaves in American -- talked to citizens in Rochester, NY about slavery. Leaders today can learn that the morality of decisions and positions should not sway their thoughts in the wrong way.

Douglass knew that leaders need to have a vision. Douglass's conviction of the hypocrisy that existed in America was shown in his vision of one day all individuals becoming free and equal. His vision of a need for change inspired others to see that this change was needed in America. Leaders today know that a clear, motivating vision for the organization opens the road to advancement.

Douglass learned from his past. Douglass knew that what motivated him was the nightmarish experiences as a slave. Leaders today have experiences, both positive and negative, which help them grow and become great. By being vulnerable and sharing their personal journeys, leaders can inspire others.

Douglass always strived to learn more. Douglass learned the alphabet from the wife of his first owners. Later he was able to get a copy of Webster's American Dictionary, and he learned every word in there. This helped him become a great writer and a great orator.

Douglass was inspirational. Douglass faced an audience who were either uninterested in slavery or thought of abolitionist as troublemakers. Even in northern towns a black speaker was not welcome. However, Douglass's inspirational speech would do the magic and changed hearts and behaviors of those who were indifferent.

Leaders can do the same today with their teams or employees who are less motivated by being clear on showing the way and speaking inspirationally to their listeners.

Douglass never quit his goals. Douglass never quit his pursuit of freedom. He could have stayed in England and lived a free life but risked returning to America to continue his fight for truth and justice. Successful leaders are persistent and find ways to achieve their goals.

Much more can be learned from Douglass's impact on American history, but we will stop here. We know that as busy leaders reading this piece you all are actively living these suggestions in order to build a more inclusive society.

Exit Like A Winner! The proven formula for selling your business.

By Edward Valaitis

As millions of business owners near retirement, they are grappling with the daunting challenge of deciding when and how to successfully sell their businesses.

According to a recent Exit Planning Institute survey, some 4.5 million companies representing \$10 trillion in market value will transition over the next decade. Of those 4.5 million, surprisingly 53% of owners also stated they have given minimal attention to determining how and when to exit.

A 2021 International Business Broker's Association (IBBA) survey indicated that retirement still leads as the number one reason business owners choose to exit their companies. A greater number of business owners (27%) also cited burnout as a major reason for selling their company. Additionally, owners mentioned health issues (15%), which was also higher than previous surveys, suggesting that the pandemic, supply chain, and hiring challenges have taken a heavy toll on business owners.

In my new book, *Exit Like A Winner*, I directly address why exiting your business is a very difficult process. The book provides detailed guidance and answers on the two primary key questions of when and how to sell a business. From a holistic perspective, the book acknowledges the strong optimism that drives many entrepreneurs into business can become a weakness leading to denial or blind spots when the time comes to separate from the business.

I also highlight the importance of one's personal and professional leadership choices required to make a smart decision as to the right time and way to sell. In one chapter entitled "School Yard Lessons," the significance of leading oneself as a prerequisite to leading others is discussed. As I reflect on my own childhood, I have realized my childhood experiences have made me a more compassionate, empathetic and resilient leader.

When I was about 10 years old, I started to work

every Saturday with my father in his landscaping business. My life consisted of getting bullied in school throughout the week, and then working 10-12 hours of hard labor on Saturdays. In addition, my parents were constantly fighting during this period of my life.

Rather than feeling pity for myself, I'd remember my grandmother Ursula's life and everything she went through -- and lost -- in Europe when she escaped both the Nazis and the communist Russians and fled to the United States. Grandma Ursula was a true mathematical genius, and I was grateful for all the help she provided with my math homework. Without knowing it, she showed me what inner strength and true resolve looked like. She was a brilliant thinker and the biggest influence on my life. She literally saved her family from direct orders to board a train that was a one-way ticket to Auschwitz during WWII. No matter how difficult my youth was at the moment, I'd reflect and think to myself, well, things could be much worse, and count my blessings.

Then one day in seventh grade, I had a defining moment. While I had no control over my weekend work schedule or over the bullies' behaviors, it dawned on me that I am in control of my life and that my future is up to no one but me. I took the figurative wheel of life into my own hands and stopped resisting school. I realized for the first time that physically, mentally, and spiritually, whatever happened would be up to me.

Day after day, I grew stronger and was no longer easy prey for the bullies. Working during the weekends also instilled the key values of hard work and dedication. I also learned time management skills. The trial by fire of my youth and the success of my adulthood formed me into someone who is relentless, detail-oriented, strategic, and persuasive—all built upon an operating system of integrity.

My childhood lessons helped me realize later on

in my career that too many founders go to their graves and leave their businesses

up for grabs, leaving their families without financial security from their many years of blood, sweat and tears. Others fall for the single, unsolicited offer trap and leave too much money on the table. I realized no one has written a book that directly and effectively deals with these crucial issues founders face.

Unlike most business books, this "how-to" guide helps business owners identify and remove their blind spots so they can make the best decisions for their unique circumstance so they can truly *Exit Like a Winner!*



Edward Valaitis

About the author:

Edward Valaitis, currently managing partner of Edison Avenue, has served on the TECO Energy Center for Leadership Advisory Board member since 2009. Edison Avenue M&A Advisors specializes in helping entrepreneurs harvest the wealth locked within their businesses. Edison Avenue is the trusted intermediary of choice when selling privately owned companies.

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Finding True Vision in Leadership

By John Townsend, Ph.D., Head of Business Transformation for FuturePlan

I found myself looking at the collection of glasses on my desk the other day and I paused to consider, "What is happening to my vision?"

As I get older, I need my spectacles for just about everything I do. One set of glasses for seeing things in the distance more clearly, sunglasses for seeing clearly in the bright Florida sunshine, and most recently, the need to keep a pair of readers nearby for close-up vision.

Seeing clearly is important in everything I do and having the right tools to support my ability to see clearly is essential. This is also true for leaders and the art of leadership.

My good friend, Bill Poole -- founder of Tampa-based J2N Global, Inc., an organization dedicated to helping companies around the globe get ready and stay ready for change -- started me on this journey several years ago by introducing me to the theme of "vision" in pursuit of leadership.

Leveraging my undergraduate degree studies in English literature for a moment, I'd like to explore the root word of vision, Spectare, and the words related to the root words including perspective, inspect, introspect, prospect and retrospect, and finally respect, which are used every day.

The root word Spectare, comes from Latin and is a verb that literally means "to see." Over the years we've incorporated the root word into new words that are both nouns and verbs. All of these words are useful and helpful, but some are misused or misunderstood. In the quest for true leadership vision, we need to take a deeper dive into the root word Spectare and the many ways it influences how we think and act.

Let's start with the word perspective, which when broken down means "my viewpoint." In this age of digital connectivity, perspectives are easy to come by, aren't they? Everyone has a "hot take" on a subject. There is no implied standard of right or wrong, factual or false, data-driven or reaction-driven. It's just one person's viewpoint. Leaders are often asked and are at times required to share their perspectives, but what's of greater interest is

how they developed these perspectives along the way. Let's hold on this thought until the end of the essay.

Moving on to inspect and introspect, both verbs focus on taking a closer, deeper, or more rigorous view. When we inspect, we are taking a deeper look into something outside of ourselves -- another person, process or system -- to scrutinize, identify root causes or gaps, and to achieve a better, more informed view of the system. When we apply introspection, we are turning the same process inward and examining ourselves. Both skills are essential to modern leadership. Good leaders know how to monitor and examine people, process, and technology to uncover performance barriers and growth opportunities. Great leaders have a high level of emotional intelligence and can turn their power of inspection inward to objectively assess their own behaviors and performance.

Now let's consider two more important terms, prospect and retrospect. Prospect comes direct from the Latin word Prospectus and is the act of looking ahead and determining a vision of the future. Retrospect is the opposite and describes the act of looking back at the past. Modern leaders need both of these skills, too. Leaders are required to create a compelling vision of the future, while at the same time, they must also have a keen awareness of the past.

Finally, one word in particular -- respect - is often misused or misunderstood. A deeper dive into the root meaning of the word respect can help leaders from all backgrounds, proficiency levels, and disciplines, see more clearly.

The word respect is used so widely and in so many circles that it's easy to lose connection with what the word really means. The terms respect or disrespect are regularly used as nouns. Respect is often referenced as something that is to be given or received, and that's perfectly appropriate. The world would be a much better place if we had more examples of individuals, groups, organizations, and governments demonstrating

respect for someone or some other point of view that differs from their own. Sadly, we don't have to look too far to find examples of disrespect these days and I believe that's largely because we don't think about the term in its truest form and meaning.

Dan Simons has a great TedTalk titled "Seeing the world as it isn't" in which he describes how our brains are naturally wired to give us visual misinformation. I extend Simon's premise and suggest that all of our senses naturally lead us down a path where we think we are experiencing the world as it really is when in fact, we are only physically capable of experiencing a very narrow sliver of the world with clarity at any given point in time.

Respect means to "look again." Not to be confused with inspect or retrospect, looking again means viewing the same situation but with a different lens. In order to do this, we must momentarily suspend our assumptions and beliefs long enough to see more objectively. This ability is not a given, it doesn't happen naturally, and leaders who aspire to greatness must practice this behavior every day.

"Looking again" is therefore an intentional act that requires discipline and practice so that we can move beyond what we see to achieve true vision. This does not imply that we abandon our perspectives, it simply means that we need to suspend our assumptions long enough to look again. When leaders achieve this, they are much more likely to see the world as it truly is, which leads to better decisions and improved performance.

Leaders achieve their fullest potential when they embrace the true meaning of the work respect by looking again. Perfecting this act will reward the practitioner with true vision.



John Townsend, DBA



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