

# Introduction

This is a different kind of book about a different kind of leadership. It's light—with more stories than strictures. I think of it as conversations you might have on a long ride, or while sitting in the bleachers at a baseball game, not what you'd hear at a college lecture or in an annual meeting. This book is decidedly not for perfect people, and it's absolutely not for fakers.

I spent many hours with my Lincoln Logs at the feet of my mom, Mary Mulhern and her best friend, Lois Southwell. They lived across the street from each other in identical floor plan, three-bedroom ranch homes. My mom had seven kids and Lois had six. On hundreds of days, over fifteen years, they would get the children ready for school, the husbands off to work, a load in the laundry, and then one—often toting an infant and/or a toddler—would cross the street to the other's home for coffee and a cigarette . . . and talk. They talked about their challenges, their children's small triumphs, their husbands' trials and tribulations—Bob working at Chevy, and Jack at Ford—about TV shows and the Vietnam War, and what they were going to do that day. Not in a million years would they have used these words to describe themselves, but let me declare it loudly here: “They were REAL LEADERS.” Real leaders, who were every day learners. This book is written in tribute to them, and to other regular-real leader-learners: front line supervisors, teachers, principals, assistant managers, deputies, associates, and aides. And it is written for line workers, loners, students, and staff.

Some might well ask: Then is everyone a leader? No, but anyone can lead.

Mom was a Catholic good-girl idealist. She clung tightly to her values, to her hopes for her kids, to her forgiving thoughts about others and to her faith. And Lois was the great realist. We moved from that street before I hit my teens, but I so remember Lois putting down her lipstick-stained coffee cup and saying through her smoker's laugh: “Oh, Mary, you don't believe that” — whether “that” was something the priest said, or a benefit-of-the-doubt thought about someone in the bowling league. They kept each other real—perched between their huge hopes for their families and their piles of kids' dirty clothes and the always almost-empty bank accounts. They encouraged each other, occasionally got frustrated by their differences, but were always real.

We lead best when we are REAL, i.e., we are telling the truth about what we see in the world, and telling the truth about what we see in ourselves. I wrote my first book about everyday and every day leaders, because this stuff isn't magic or fantasy—JFK or

Reagan. It's about learning and growing, a little at a time, imperceptibly, just as Mary and Lois' kids grew, just as their husbands' careers surely climbed and just as surely leveled off.

As we continually work, every day, to be more effective in the ways that we lead other people, we create better results. We also increasingly find out just who we are, what our best skills are, and how to overcome the things that get in our way. We become better for ourselves and for others. That's what Lois Southwell did for Mary Mulhern and what Mary Mulhern did for Lois Southwell.

In tribute to Mom and Lois, *Real Leadership* begins with Chapter One at home. I have long-argued that home is the most important place where any of us lead. Although we still tend to pretend that leadership belongs to the spheres of board rooms and state capitols, it is home where leadership matters the most. I have yet to come across a CEO, congressman, activist or editor whose voice didn't become most real, heartfelt and passionate when they talked about their children. And how we lead at home shapes everything by shaping everyone—our citizens, our parishioners, our volunteers, our elected leaders and bosses all came from a home. And nothing shapes or deforms leadership as much as the examples our little people observe in our behavior every day.

Applying leadership ideas to the home sphere makes them new, fun, and genuine. At home, there's no room for what Lois would call bullshit. You're just not credible when you pontificate to a spouse or do the one-minute manager thing on a 3-year old. Engaging my two teenage girls taught me more about leadership than any boss I've ever had or political leader I've ever observed.\* And my parents were unquestionably the major models for how I lead—outside and inside the home.

The journey of *Be Real* will lead you from Family to Power, where in Chapter Two some leaders act with huge grants of authority. What can we learn from people leading on the big stage—presidents and governors and CEOs? They're more relevant for everyday leaders than you might think.

Chapter Three talks about the importance of Passion and then we move through deep personal aspects of leadership: how Emotion affects us; then how that crazy thing we call Ego can be our friend or our worst nemesis. And in Chapter Six we explore some of what makes leadership truly profound, as we explore stories and ideas around soul, faith, spirit and heart.

Then the book shifts back out to how these inner factors play out in the world. In Chapter Seven on Harmony, I'll offer some tools to help you blend talents, to see how leaders can also follow, and how followers can lead. Then we'll head into the critically hard work of Challenge and Change—twins that will be around for a long time to come.

Finally, we finish by returning to the leader who must stay positive and resilient in times and situations that can wear you down. In the final chapter on Attitude, we return to the core theme: We lead others best when we lead with our best self. You can't change anyone else—as parents know the best—but you have the capacity to change yourself. You can lead at 50% or 75% of your capacity, or you can lead with your very best—most energized, focused, fun, and free self. And this last chapter offers help for that, including some of the best techniques from the most successful executives. It explores the core values that drove the world's best-ever unauthorized leader. And it outlines some of the best research about maintaining your personal strength amidst the challenges of leadership.

As you will see when you turn the pages, *Be Real* offers nuggets, not one long flowing continuous monologue.

This book is instead meant to be a conversation, like the ones Mary had with Lois. The nuggets in this book come from *Reading for Leading* (RFL), a weekly email I began writing a decade ago. In 2000, I began sharing weekly thoughts to about 25 of my family and friends. After years spent in government and education, I was overjoyed that I was doing full time what I most loved: learning with people—clients, partners, and mentors I sought out—about how people lead best. My weekly RFL email was a way to give back some of the wisdom I was able to absorb—as well as the questions I continued to have—to those I loved.

The beauty of email—and later the blog format—is that from my first RFL email I was engaged in a dialogue with readers. This was not like a newspaper column, but was written like an old-fashioned letter. And when I wrote, individuals would write back—pushing back, pushing out, and pulling me forward. The list of recipients grew to 13,000 but for me it's never lost the “coffee and a cigarette” feel of my Mom's kitchen klatches with Lois. I came to know many readers by name. Some were predictable, while others were wildly imaginative. Some were religious, others political, a few angry, and many inspired. When my friend Colin died, I wrote pieces with his wife Trish in mind. I was blown away when Ford CEO Alan Mullaly would occasionally write back with a “nice job” comment, usually when the topic was empowering and democratizing leadership. Most amazing, I've had numerous strangers offer the highest

praise (to the holy spirit) when they'd say, "I felt you wrote that column just for me." I hope you might find a passage or two hits you in that way.

One of those writers who caught my eye was "the midnight poet," Elwin "Mick" McKellar. Mick is an impassioned "Yooper," a resident of Michigan's unspoiled Upper Peninsula, a lover of the arts, an historian, and a wonderful writer and thinker. Mick's RFL comments made it clear to me that he and others often made points more clearly and perceptively than I had. And where I would float off into the ether, Mick was for me, like Lois was for my Mom, pulling me back down to face the tough realities. One of those realities was the layoff that whacked him over a year ago.

I wanted to collect and improve upon the work of RFL, and when I heard that Mick had become one of Michigan's great "workers without work," I asked him if he would consider collaborating with me and he quickly went to work organizing and improving the work. We agreed that if this was "Real Leadership," it could not be my voice alone. So, Mick not only organized my work, but he also culled some of the best comments that readers offered in response to my writing. So, this is not just a book about real leaders, but also a book by real leaders. You will be happy to know that I insisted that Mick include some of his own thoughtful responses to my writing.

Mick made countless great contributions to this effort, for which I am grateful. I'll take the blame for the simplistic and one-sided opinions, and for what's missing. I'd love to hear your feedback at: [mulhern@danmulhern.com](mailto:mulhern@danmulhern.com). At the same site you can subscribe to Reading for Leading.

Your input will help me as I strive to write and to lead with my best self.