



William W. George

**EDITORS' NOTE** At Harvard Business School (HBS), Bill George has taught leadership as a Professor of Management Practice since 2004. He is the former Chair and Chief Executive Officer of Medtronic and the author of four best-selling books. His most recent book, *Discover Your True North*, was published in August 2015. Professor George is faculty chair of HBS's executive education program Authentic Leadership Development and Co-Chair of Leading Global Enterprises. George joined Medtronic in 1989 as President and Chief Operating Officer and was Chief Executive Officer from 1991 to 2001, and Chairman of the Board from 1996 to 2002. Earlier in his career, he was an executive with Honeywell and Litton Industries and served in the U.S. Department of Defense. George currently serves as a director of Goldman Sachs and Mayo Clinic, and recently as Director of ExxonMobil, Novartis, and Target. He is a director of World Economic Forum USA, Minnesota's Destination Medical Center Corporation, and the Guthrie Theater. George received his B.S.I.E. with high honors from Georgia Tech and his M.B.A. with high distinction from Harvard University, where he was a Baker Scholar. He has received honorary Ph.D.s from Georgia Tech, Mayo Medical School, University of St. Thomas, Augsburg College, and Bryant University.

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** Founded in 1908 as part of Harvard University, Harvard Business School is located on a 40-acre campus in Boston. Its faculty of more than 200 offers full-time programs leading to the M.B.A. and doctoral degrees, as well as more than 80 open-enrollment Executive Education programs and more than 60 custom programs. For more than a century, HBS faculty have drawn on their research, their experience in working with organizations worldwide, and their passion for teaching to educate leaders who have shaped the practice of business and entrepreneurship around the globe.

#### Are there common traits among leaders?

It has changed a lot in my lifetime. We had more hierarchical leaders from the 1960s to the

# Defining Leadership

## An Interview with William W. George, Senior Fellow, Harvard Business School

1990s, and we got into a “Me” generation of leaders. We had been choosing leaders for their charisma and style more so than for their substance and character.

I decided to start writing about what it means to be an authentic leader, what it means to be a real person. Today's leaders have changed dramatically, particularly those chosen since 2008. These people have learned the hard way how not to do it. Since then, we've elected an amazing group of authentic leaders as CEOs.

#### Is it all bad when a leader is thought of as a brand?

It's different for a founder like Bill Gates, or Howard Schultz. It's generally dangerous for CEOs to be the brand because they are going to move on.

#### For someone like you, who understands what it means to groom the next generation academically, do you believe leadership can be taught?

You can't teach leadership per se, but you can create an environment where students can learn about their own leadership, but they have to lead in their own way, and it can't emulate someone else. To do that, they have to be real and authentic. Some leaders have underlying anger that stems from their past – they have to deal with that. We ask everyone to deal with their issues.

It's important to be authentic and vulnerable, and to acknowledge mistakes. It might result in being challenged but honesty is key.

#### What do you enjoy most about writing and were you hooked after putting together your first book?

I found that writing was a way to reach people. What I love to do the most is to mentor and coach others.

With the new book, I also want to reach the Millennial generation, which has so much potential. I want them to think about these issues early on, not once they get to their desks. To be great leaders, people have to use their gifts that are unique to them and develop them – it's no different than being a musician or an athlete.

One needs to be serious about developing as a leader because leading is a great challenge. But there is also no greater reward than having impact, and leaders have huge impact on people and on society.

#### Having observed, met, and studied many great entrepreneurs, how would you describe them?

Entrepreneurs have certain characteristics. I'm a builder – not a starter, but others are most effective at starting organizations. There are certain people that get to this level and need a builder.

People can find their sweet spots where their abilities come together with their motivations. It's also possible to be creative and practice entrepreneurship within a large organization.

#### What would you say to the next generation of leaders and are we teaching them the right things in academia today?

The leaders are out there. We need to give them the opportunity to become leaders early in their careers. It's time the Baby Boomers, in many cases, step aside and turn leadership over to the Gen-Xers and Millennials and tell them to get their organizations back on a growth track.

Are we teaching leadership well in academia? No. We're teaching so many managerial skills that too many people are going on to become consultants, accountants, and specialists. We need to do a better job of developing leaders in business schools. However, there is no formulaic approach; no “seven easy steps” to become a leader. We need to create an environment where people can practice their leadership in business schools – not just study other leaders but do it themselves and learn about themselves so they're prepared to go out into the world and make things happen.

The academic world is behind the business world in terms of developing leaders. The great business organizations know how to develop leaders by doing, and the great leaders have the capacity to marry qualities of the heart with qualities of the head.

#### You put a 10-year limit on your role as CEO at Medtronic. Why did you do that and do you believe other companies should do similarly?

Organizations go through transitions and they periodically need new leadership and creativity, which can occur in a new environment. The hardest thing is getting that transition right. It's not just about finding an immediate replacement for the current CEO. The search must be for a real leader who can propel the business forward over the next 10 years.

#### What makes Harvard so special for you?

Harvard as an institution has brought great minds together but we're also trying to develop leaders with great hearts. Leaders can't be great unless they're also good human beings. ●