Hey Leaders: Stop Thinking So Much and Just Do It

To reach your true leadership potential, writes INSEAD professor Herminia Ibarra, push yourself outside your comfort zone.

by Daniel Gross

Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader

“You can only learn what you need to know about your job and about yourself by doing it—not by just thinking about it.” That may be a strange way for someone who thinks about (and teaches and writes about) business for a living to start a book. And it certainly represents a fork from the increasingly well-trod intellectual path that celebrates mindfulness and introversion. But to Herminia Ibarra, it represents a truism: “Simply put, change happens from the outside in, not from the inside out.”

Those are just two of the many counterintuitive and easily digestible bits of wisdom in Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader. Concise, direct, and possessing a certain flair, Ibarra’s new book (her second) is a projection of her personality. A native of Miami and veteran of Harvard Business School, Ibarra since 2002 has taught at INSEAD in Paris, where she is the Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning and heads her department.

The book’s core message is simple and incisive. In an age of constant disruption, you better redefine yourself before the rapidly shifting sands of corporate America and technology redefine you. You have to act like a leader before you’re appointed to a leadership position, and you have to manage your own leadership path. The way to do it is by intentionally making yourself uncomfortable. Only by exiting your comfort zone can you develop “outsight”—the term she coins to describe the valuable perspective gained through actions.

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To do so, people must overcome the gravitational pull of inertia. Ibarra notes that psychology and financial incentives push us to do more of what we are good at, and to get still better at it. But, she writes, “When we allocate more time to what we do best, we devote less time to learning other things that are also important.” And pursuing the comfort of our competencies can set us up for failure when circumstances change. A professional might spend decades thriving as a newspaper editor, or as a manager of a big-box electronics retail supply chain, or overseeing coal-mining operations—only to find that circumstances suddenly render his expertise significantly less valuable, even obsolete.

To avoid this competency trap, Ibarra argues, people have to regard their jobs as platforms for building “outsight” and leadership capacities. How? By creating slack in your schedule so you can get involved in projects outside your core area and participate in extracurricular industry activities. By consciously making the effort to network with people who work in different industries and have different competencies. By finding a context or situation that makes you uneasy—giving a presentation, showing up at a conference for the first time, speaking up at an internal meeting. “Act as radically different from your normal behavior as you can,” she suggests.

Trying on a new identity at work may seem anathema to the rising cult of authenticity. But Ibarra urges readers to
recognize how adhering strictly to behaviors that feel natural can inhibit career evolution. While everybody wants to be true to themselves, they can “hit a wall as they enter the transition to more senior leadership roles.” Ibarra notes that she has faced this dilemma in her own career. Starting to teach compelled her to make the adjustment from an academic researcher to someone who had to directly engage MBA students. Years later, when she was tapped to become a department chair at INSEAD, she felt the job was infringing on her capacity to do what she was best at—writing and teaching. “I wasn’t stepping up to leadership, because I didn’t think that leading was real work,” she writes. To gain insight, Ibarra practiced some of what she preaches. She began networking outside her comfort zone, sought out board positions, and became involved with outside groups like the World Economic Forum.

Ibarra’s advice definitely cuts against the grain. As she put it in a recent interview with strategy+business, her argument calls into question the “long tradition of social psychology research that the way we think follows what we do, and not the other way around.” And humans tend not to focus on the need to build capacities before we actually need them.

There may be practical obstacles to acting like a leader in the way Ibarra suggests. “The actual advice I’ve given people is to try to carve out 10 to 15 percent of their time for side projects—networking events, connecting to people not in the immediate path of your operational responsibilities,” she said. But not every company or organization is designed to let employees have reliable slack in their schedules; if anything, the trend is in the opposite direction.

Also, the prescriptions may not work in every context. Ibarra concedes that the impulses that inform her book are characteristically American—the ability to network, to invent one’s self, and then to reinvent one’s self. In the U.S., “it’s a culture where hierarchical differences are minimized, and you can walk up to anybody and introduce yourself,” she said. “It’s not something you do as easily in France.”

But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. And it’s never too early to start. Becoming a leader, this valuable book reminds us, is a process, not simply an event. And it requires building a set of skills rather than following a series of prescribed steps. “Stepping up to leadership is more like becoming a great chef,” Ibarra writes, “than following a recipe.”

( Published on Strategy + Business, March 15th 2015)