FRE SIGHTS A INSIGHTS YOURSELF AT THE NEXT LEVEL

Grace Owen



This book is dedicated to my mother, **Rose Abena Owusua Mintah** 1943-2010

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INTRODUCTION

'If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader'

President John Quincy Adams

MY STORY...

It was a warm, humid day in May 2012 and while travelling in a taxi I noticed the new road, which during my trip the year before had been incomplete. I was visiting Accra the capital of Ghana in West Africa and, strangely, seeing the road inspired me. This concrete infrastructure, a symbol of connectivity and progress, was an example of the change being reported excitedly across Africa. Then it happened...I felt the inner urge.

'What was that?' I wondered. For a split second I imagined being part of the modern developments in Ghana, my homeland. A jumble of questions came. How could I make a contribution to this country or even the continent of Africa? What did I have to offer? What did this feeling mean? Intuitively, I knew it was an important moment.

I named this inner urge *The Leader's Call*. It described what I had felt in that moment: an impulse combining ambition, excitement, desire, adventure and possibility. On my return to London *The Leader's Call* took me on a 'heart-lurching' and at times 'mind-twisting' exploration during which I sought to answer the questions raised by

the inner urge. After two years, I came to a conclusion. The inner urge was moving me to the next level of my leadership experience...I was in transition, again. For me, this meant being a leader who was committed to and active in making the world a better place. It meant redirecting my time, energy, personality, values, talents, experience, skills, knowledge, resources and network. It took another year to achieve that reality.

The Leader's Call changed my life, not abruptly or drastically but slowly and deliberately. In fact, I now know that I had been responding to it subconsciously for nearly four decades, but in May 2012 I felt the inner urge very powerfully and 'heard' that call to action as if for the first time. Why? It may be due to what had happened on Easter Monday a few weeks before.

My family and I had a near death experience. Our car crashed on a motorway in the UK. Despite crossing three lanes of traffic and hitting two trees on the verge, we emerged from the wreckage with only cuts, bruising and in shock. It was, to us, a miraculous escape.

It was a life-changing event that led me to re-evaluate my life and work. I became more sensitised to my inner yearnings, as I was when I felt the inner urge on that new road in Accra. Your own hearing of The Leader's Call may not come as the result of a dramatic event like mine, or it may be even more so. However, at some point in your life and for a reason that is unique to you, you will hear The Leader's Call.

It has taken me a few years to consolidate, clarify and conclude my response to this inner urge. Why? How? All shall become clear as you read this book!

The inner urge gave me the conviction to stop leading

in places and ways that I was used to, comfortable with and that mainly brought material reward. It took me across many invisible thresholds of growth as I bravely went to places I had not been to before. It revealed a deep motivation that I had held since childhood – a desire to make a difference to others.

Looking back, I can see that my experience of leadership began in childhood. Aged nine, I was invited to become captain of the primary school's netball team. A teacher spotted the leadership potential in me and nurtured it. In that role I had to participate and cooperate with, encourage and guide my peers. Together we celebrated success and learned to improve our game through failure. Since then I have experienced the highs, lows and plateaus that come with the leadership territory, navigating from one level to the next.

As a teenager I was coordinator of a small church music group. I 'fell' into this role simply because I was passionate about playing the guitar! I embraced this responsibility and enjoyed developing my musical skills. However, being shy I struggled with the visibility and exposure that performing to an audience brought. It took years to get used to this, but during that time I discovered my talent for planning and organising. I had a natural ability to see details while appreciating and understanding that there was also a bigger picture.

As a young adult, after completing university, I became a team leader as part of the graduate management training programme with Marks and Spencer. My biggest challenge here was communicating effectively with people of different ages and cultures. I overcame this by learning to listen (trying not to think about what I would

say next), by asking questions and building relationships that were professional and personal. I found that most people loved to talk about their lives and families. Developing this interpersonal skill over time raised my self-esteem and self-confidence.

My repertoire of leadership skills was put to the biggest test when I was appointed head of learning and development for Costa Coffee. This role brought new dimensions such as leading and developing a national team, directing the innovation of an organisation learning strategy and then leading a group to implement it. Being so busy meant that my work-life balance really suffered. At the end of this assignment I was nearly burnt out.

Up until then, I had been a leader in organisations where the next level meant a promotion. I had stayed in environments where I was familiar with the ebb and flow of corporate life. That changed in 2003, when I moved out of the comfort zone of employment to start a niche business. Beforehand, my primary focus had been leading others, now I was solely responsible for leading myself!

Developing the business required me to hone my skills and develop new ones, so that I could offer appropriate, effective services and products to my clients. These included coaching, writing, marketing, consulting, training, facilitating, mentoring, speaking, teaching and advising. Each of these took me up to a new level within my business and myself.

At this point my leadership story represents major shifts from one level of leadership to the next in a way that was typical, even the norm within a conventional work environment. The leadership responsibilities, skills and experience were increasing gradually and I had

pretty much expected that. However, the next level does not always mean that you progress up an organisation chart. The status and title that comes with a more senior position is not as important as what you are being called to and the ways in which you are required to use your unique abilities. Being a leader is a big responsibility wherever you are.

When I was invited to chair a new local community youth project and become a trustee of a new non-governmental organisation (NGO), these next levels of leadership presented unexpected opportunities. I was supporting grass roots organisations with a handful of people who did not have a global profile or easy access to resources. I extended my research and writing skills in these roles: writing strategic papers and reports, monthly newsletters for supporters and copy for websites.

For years, I had held an ambition to write a trilogy of self-help development books but I did not know that this was a next level. Writing my first book *The Career Itch – 4 Steps for Taking Control of What You Do Next* was a new experience and an act of leadership. No one else (that I knew of at the time) had written a book about the inner restlessness that many of us have around the direction of our careers. Since then I have supported five other first-time authors to turn their experiences into books that inspire and inform.

I can see that hearing and acting upon *The Leader's Call* has taken me to unexpected places. Being responsible for coordinating a team of cooks at a homeless shelter had not been on my radar. Nor was my being identified as one of a hundred African Diaspora ChangeMakers in the UK. I did not know that I would become a non-executive director

for Camfed International, develop Pan-African leaders in West, North, East and South Africa or become founder and director of community legacy project, African Diaspora Kids.

All of this because of The Leader's Call! My response to The Leader's Call in May 2012 shows up in my life each day, in three ways.

- 1. I am developing leaders who want to make a difference to others from their virtual, open-plan and mobile offices, from their homes and schools. from high street cafés and inner-city places of worship – in fact from wherever they happen to be.
- 2. I am a philanthropist who supports causes that are making Africa a better place through nurturing and releasing the leadership potential of women, men and children on the continent and in the Diaspora.
- 3. I am a writer whose books encourage, equip and empower readers to take responsibility for their personal and professional selves so that they excel. They in turn enable others at home, in teams, organisations, communities and society to flourish.

My story demonstrates that you can come to leadership through a variety of means. It may be an invitation because someone has spotted potential in you. You might take on a leadership role and discover you enjoy it! Perhaps, for whatever reason, you find it stressful so you want to give up or indeed, keep on trying! Opportunities will keep coming

your way whether you feel ready or not. I believe leaders are born and made.

It does not matter whether you are just starting out on the leadership journey or beginning another chapter of your leadership story after years of experience. The next level is not about getting an ego boost or becoming a guru. Instead *The Leader's Call* is a signal that it is time to move to different places and spaces inside yourself and out in the world. It reflects the leader you have been, who you are now and who you are ready to become.

The leaders I have worked with, in the past and present, have felt the inner urge but like me they did not have a name for it. What I noticed, when looking back on my own leadership transitions and at what these other leaders were telling me, is that this inner urge always precedes the next level. Identifying and naming this feeling, and wanting to inspire and guide other leaders, is what led me to write this book.

These are leaders from all walks of life, with a title and without, with a remit and without, with a profile and without. They are natural leaders and self-taught leaders. They are early developers and late bloomers. They are leaders that 'sink' and 'swim' at the next level, they succeed and fail – publicly and privately. Some leaders have access to resources, others have little but they are driven to keep on keeping on. These leaders are found in every profession, they are generalists, specialists or experts in their field.

When these leaders respond to *The Leader's Call* they move, not always willingly, happily, smoothly or consciously, to the next level of their leadership experience.

Are you feeling the inner urge? Have you heard *The Leader's Call*? Whether your answer is 'yes', 'I'm not sure' or 'not yet', I have written this book for you. I believe that

leaders are change makers and game changers. The world needs you!

This book distils the countless interactions. observations and conversations I have had with leaders. It describes what I have noticed and sensed. It defines what makes leaders excel and derail. The Leader's Call impels you to action; whether you are a natural-born leader or whether you have nurtured and honed your leadership abilities over time.

Now that you know my leadership story, I would like to know about yours. I wonder what led you to pick up this book and what leadership responsibilities, skills and experiences have brought you to where you are right now.

YOUR LEADERSHIP STORY

Take this short self-assessment and circle one letter in each category that, overall, best represents your leadership experiences to date.

How did you come to leadership?

- a) By surprise
- b) Through an opportunity
- c) Career progression
- d) It's in your nature

Which of these words best describes how you feel about being a leader?

- a) Resistant
- b) Interested
- c) Challenged
- d) Willing

What concerns do you have about leading?

- a) I'd rather not be a leader
- b) I'm not sure if I am doing it right
- c) I'd like to be more consistent
- d) I might miss out on an opportunity

How do you spend most of your time?

- a) Trying to stay motivated
- b) Getting things done on my to-do list
- c) Directing others to get things done
- d) Exploring how best to make things happen

What advice would you give a new leader?

- a) Don't do it
- b) Keep going
- c) You will improve
- d) Learn from everything

What do you need right now?

- a) Someone to guide me
- b) More experience
- c) To balance life and work
- d) Reflection time

How would you describe your next level of leadership?

- a) Staying where I am
- b) Leading a team, group or project
- c) Leading in the community or society
- d) Leading wherever I go

Interpreting your responses

There are four leadership types that are likely to reflect your leadership story to date.

Mostly $\mathbf{a} = \text{reluctant leader}$

Mostly $\mathbf{b} = \text{new leader}$

Mostly C = experienced leader

Mostly $\mathbf{d} = \text{mentor leader}$

about vour leadership type and what you can do about

These types of leader are drawn from my own experiences of being a leader, of leading teams and of developing leadership in others. They are the stories of leaders I have met, worked with, researched, listened to and read about. These are not the only types that reflect where you might have been, where you are or where you might end up as you move to the next level. However, these are the recurring stories and dominant narratives that emerge when leaders talk openly and honestly about their experiences.

It is really important that you do not judge one type of leader as better or worse than another. We are all a combination of these leaders depending on the places where we lead now and where we may lead next. What these types demonstrate is that being a leader is not easy or straightforward. This is partly due to the nature of the different arenas in which leaders are required to operate. I call these the five domains, and each one involves its own challenges.