Jawad Cipriani: Some would describe you as a leader. How would you describe yourself?

Tom Harford: I'm a manager who oversees people and projects. That, in a superficial and nominal way, makes me a leader. Any insights I cull concerning leadership are from people I consider to be actual leaders, in the more robust sense of the term.

JC: And who are some of those people?

TH: It really varies widely, as there are many types. The idea of leadership is very much tied to its specific time, place, and context. Leadership, conventionally defined, brings to mind certain types of individuals: people, for example, who have aspired to it, risen to it because of the strength of their abilities and talents. For others, events propel them—it’s that old saw, “some have greatness thrust upon them and some achieve greatness.” I particularly admire the former—that is, individuals who find themselves in a situation that, under normal circumstances, would keep many of us entangled. Somehow, the dormant leader in them emerges and they turn the oppressive nature of this context into an opportunity for change. They are the greatest leaders.

JC: Do you think there are qualities that exist within a leader, no matter which scenario?

TH: I do not think there is a fixed set of qualities that make for a good leader with a capital “L,” but I do think there are certain “family resemblances” among successful leaders. Some leaders, for example, know how to lead from behind, while others know how to lead from the front. And there are leaders who recognize intrinsically that circumstances dictate which option is the better one. There are certain qualities that, I suppose, may be transcendent; for example, most strong leaders have a deeply held belief in the idea or cause to which they are drawn. Conversely, rigidity in a leader is usually a reliable harbinger of failure—that is, an inability to think beyond the abstract, in terms of the idea or the movement that one may be inspired to lead. Other than that, context and history are everything.

JC: Are there any contexts in your experience that you can look to and consider yourself a leader in that situation?

TH: I’ve been an ad hoc leader in odd little ways. I was on the board of a small nonprofit theatre and found myself filling a void, being a leading voice in what the season should be, how we should fundraise and things of that nature. I led and designed a retention initiative at my previous institution because, while teaching in its university writing program, I noticed a lot of attrition among new students. I was curious why. I think wherever I have most successfully led something it has been initially unplanned—a situation I’ve found myself in, but one with a driving question for which I sought an answer.
**JC:** What is one of the greatest lessons you've learned in those experiences?

**TH:** Don't assume early on that convictions equate answers. All too often people confuse conviction with having the correct solution to a problem. Conviction is only the spark that leads you to inquire and question how something may be resolved.

**JC:** Do you think this certain conviction around a topic is something that exists in anyone?

**TH:** Under the right circumstances, I suppose it can. It's hard to say. There have been folks who have risen to leadership roles who seem to have surprised everyone when they've stepped up to the task. Others, you see signs early on that they're the alpha of the group, showing signs of leadership in, say, preschool, as if they are a leader in search of a cause—you wonder if there's something innate in their makeup that makes them intrinsically suited toward that task. Smarter minds can discuss how to determine the nature/nurture divide, but I do believe circumstances and how they are thrust upon an individual play a huge role. Most people (rightly so) shy away from leading when the stakes are very high because, let's face it, it’s a very risky profession. History has shown us that to be a leader of movements that challenge the status quo does not infrequently result in death. A given status quo, even when viewed by a majority as unfair or unsustainable, is often deemed a better alternative to instability.

**JC:** So do you think all leaders challenge the status quo, or does a leader also recognize when the status quo may be necessary?

**TH:** It's both. Sometimes you need a good leader to help stabilize the status quo because there's a threat to it. Sometimes the status quo may be what a society wants to maintain and good stewardship, good leadership, can be just as challenging, even more so because it doesn’t have that freshly inspirational mission to it. I think maintaining stability is not something to be smirked at.

**JC:** What’s a challenge you have had in a role that you have taken, or has been thrust upon you?

**TH:** As a manager, one of the greatest challenges I had was at my previous institution when I was asked to serve for one year with the sole purpose of cleaning up a troubled situation, which meant dismantling a program and reinventing it. This meant laying off an entire staff and then reassessing from the ground up. That was very tough. It introduced me to the idea of creative destruction. Sometimes you have to break something down completely in order to move forward and evolve, and that’s very challenging.

**JC:** When’s a time you have failed?

**TH:** I think when you lead any large project or operation, you fail all the time. It’s not a question of avoiding failure completely. It’s failing in the right way. Some really interesting CEOs have talked about the importance of risk and failure. I think whether it’s in the field of science, entrepreneurship, or politics, failing becomes the process by which you determine how you will ultimately succeed—having said that, there is a question of scale. There’s productive failing and then there is destructive and habitual failing—that is, repeating the same mistakes over and over again without learning from them. That’s how you drive organizations or countries into the ground.
JC: And productive failure?

TH: Productive failure is when you are experimenting and stretching the boundaries of something in a manner that is a trajectory to success. You have to go through trials and tribulations. You have to go through experimentation. No one would say that the Wright Brothers failed at flying because their first attempts were failures. That was the process by which they were ultimately able to tweak and adjust their project, to succeed. That’s generally true of any successful endeavor.

JC: In the trials, where do you find motivation?

TH: Conviction and experience. Conviction is important. You believe this idea has merit, so you are going to see it through despite it not reaping the results you immediately desire. The second is experience, having gone through it and seeing that success is always preceded by some failures. Sometimes you get it right at a first bat, but those are few and far between and when you get it right you embrace it.

JC: How do you celebrate success?

TH: I don’t know if I celebrate it. The interesting thing about success is that it brings a new set of questions. Any organization, any entity, is continuously evolving. Success is just another plateau where you start asking new sets of questions.

JC: Where do values fall in all of this?

TH: Like anything, it’s a question of proportionality. I have seen a lot of people with really strong convictions not succeed because of a certain inflexibility in their values and those convictions—perfection as the enemy of progress. No person is an island. If you are initiating change, it’s a delicate balance between compromise and negotiation without totally killing that which you are pursuing. The idea that your idea is totally correct, that people are totally with you or against you, is a nice recipe for you not being able to achieve anything.

JC: You talked about being a manager and not so much a leader. How do you work to support those that you manage?

TH: By making sure they understand that I am more interested in “yes” than “no.” I welcome their ideas. It’s up to me to define the larger strategic vision of say, for example, the Dean of Students Office, but I rely on them to help me articulate and realize it, and I welcome their ideas on how to do so. Sun Tzu wrote: “A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When this work is done, their aim fulfilled, they will say ‘We did this ourselves.’” That’s a little extreme on the pendulum, because I do think there are contexts where people are looking for someone to define what is nebulous to them—I reserve the right to be an autocrat—but it has been my experience that goals are often achieved more effectively when guided by a gentle hand. In other words, sometimes leadership is just getting out of the way.