



CHAPTER SEVEN

WRITING FOR LEADERSHIP: PENNING YOUR LEADERSHIP VOICE

By Sarah McArthur

The most original thing a writer can do is write like himself. It is also his most difficult task.
—ROBERTSON DAVIES (CANADIAN NOVELIST, 1913–1995)

At the moment of this writing, there are 1,427,897 Business & Investing titles listed on Amazon. More than one-third of these books are in the Management & Leadership category. And yet, there are thousands more books on the subject being written at this very moment. Business runs shy of the gamut of History books (2,374,960 titles) and Literature & Fiction (2,135,181 titles), but appears to be more intriguing a subject for readers than Religion & Spirituality (with 985,484 titles). It's far more exciting to readers and possibly more engaging for writers than Arts & Photography (413,947 titles) or Entertainment (496,568 titles).¹

What does this say about the subject of “writing for leadership”? It says that if you are one of the many, many people who want to write or are currently writing about leadership, it won't be easy to stand out—and it won't be a breeze to write from a fresh perspective. In addition, without content that reveals something new, interesting, and useful to readers that is written in a unique leadership voice, your book will be tossed aside into the massive sea of unread business books. In my experience these books often tend to end up on the authors' bookshelves, so that others will notice the title in their library. Its function is a form of intimidation. In reality, theirs is just another one of the millions of unread books ranked on Amazon with one star or less.

Where Do I Start?

The beginning is the most important part of the work.

—THE REPUBLIC, PLATO (GREEK PHILOSOPHER, 424/423 BC–348/347 BC)

First, I have to say, I feel uniquely *un*qualified to tell business leaders and coaches anything about coaching high potentials for leadership. I've never coached a leader (I've worked for them); I've never led a business (I've worked in them and run my own small editing firm). But I *have* read hundreds of books on the subject both before and after publication, written by established thought leaders, high-potential budding leaders, frontline leaders, and their coaches. And for nearly two decades I've spoken with countless aspiring and established authors about their business and leadership works to help them understand what they might offer to their readers. All this has made me somewhat of an expert in the field of business, leadership, and management writing. As a matter of fact, one of my mentors, coeditor of this book and author of the hilarious exploits of Dr. Fink,² Larry Lyons, once said to me, "Sarah, I believe with all of the writings of ours that you have helped us with, we should give you a PhD in Leadership Writing!"

Having worked with authors, coaches, and leaders to find their leadership voice in writing—be it book, article, or blog—I always advise people to begin by asking themselves introspective and *so-what?* questions, such as:

- What is my idea?
- What is my experience?
- Why do I want to share this idea?

Take me. My answer is simple: help people find meaning and inspiration in their own lives by contributing their ideas, experience, beliefs, and stories to the global pool of knowledge through the written word.

What Is My Idea?

Imagination has brought mankind through the dark ages to its present state of civilization. Imagination led Columbus to discover America. Imagination led Franklin to discover electricity.³

—L. FRANK BAUM (AMERICAN AUTHOR, 1856–1919)

You've probably heard it said that everyone has at least one work of writing in them. It's true! Everyone has a story to tell and something to teach the rest of

us. However, it takes dedication, perseverance, and devotion to bring your ideas to fruition in the written word. And it takes concerted effort, hard work, and skill to put forth your idea in such a way that you connect with your reader. Deeply.

For novice authors, the first inkling of your idea is often the thought that comes right off the top of your head. It is the *given subject* about which you have always wanted to write. It is your foundation or the first layer of the onion. It is what you know. And it's always been there nagging at you and imploring you to write it down.

For experienced writers, *the idea* is often the passing thought that comes to you while writing about something else, or while you are chatting about something else. It might emerge from some challenging situation, person, or learning point. It is the thought that strikes you in a conversation, while doing a task, or attending a meeting. It is the aha! moment. This idea is so loud and impactful you want to explore it further, because you feel there is much more to be uncovered about your newfound subject and *you* want to say it. These moments are fleeting and fickle. When you have such an idea, write it down—not in another moment, but *right now*—as it may never return!

If this is your first foray into writing, do take the opportunity to run your idea past a friend or colleague to gauge their interest. Does it resonate with your confidant? Does it inspire a conversation? These are sure signs that there is more to be explored. However, if the idea dead-ends or hits a seemingly impassable roadblock, you have two options *and you can do both*: (1) massage the idea until it inspires enthusiasm; (2) find another confidant.

Experienced writers know that sharing their concept with others helps them flesh it out. This helps you answer the question: is it still worth following through on this idea? This is one of those questions about which it's good to have feedback. Also, talking with another person helps you gather energy to get started and it often provides previously unconsidered content, direction, and parameters for your piece. In other words, such discussion points out the experience you have to share about the subject and the information you'll need to gather to fill in the blank spots.

What Is My Experience?

Words empty as the wind are best left unsaid.

—HOMER (GREEK EPIC POET, 8TH CENTURY BC)

Have you ever come across a piece of writing that is empty? There are many words on the page, but there is nothing being said? In such a case, the writer likely had an interesting idea but didn't prop it up with his or her experience, thus

empty, meaningless, repetitive words were thrown onto the page, which readers quickly interpret as *fluff* and *nonsense*.

So, a good question to ask yourself is: “What is my experience with this idea that I would like to share?” And, further, what stories do you have to tell about it? What have you been taught about it in life, in school, at home, on the job? How are you connected to this idea, emotionally, intellectually, personally, professionally? What tales have you heard from those who have experienced it? To whom can you talk who has knowledge of this subject? How interested are you in doing the research it will take to fill in the blind spots and empty passages that are inevitable—because no one knows everything about anything?

You can, of course, try taking the know-it-all approach, but it’s unlikely to work. Know-it-alls sound arrogant and superficial even when they are not; even worse, they sound phony. One thing readers are sure to spot is a phony—someone whose words are empty, who is not invested in his or her subject or reveals no clear experience with it. This wastes the reader’s precious time. Sadly, this is a common style today, rampant really; publishers used to be the guards of the *fluff* and *nonsense* floodgate, but with the advent of the Internet, self-publishing, and e-media it seems that this is now out of their hands and has become the grassroots responsibility of the hapless *reader*. So, be warned, readers do not like *fluff* and *nonsense* and they will not forgive you!

Why Do I Want to Share this Idea?

The desire to write grows with writing.

—DESIDERIUS ERASMUS ROTERODAMUS (DUTCH RENAISSANCE HUMANIST,
THEOLOGIAN, 1466–1536)

Assuming that you are not taking the know-it-all approach, and you are armed with an intriguing idea about which you have experience, stories, and resources to share, why do you want to share it with readers? The answer to this question will be your saving grace. It will provide the meaning and purpose to keep on writing when you feel like giving up.

So, again, I ask, why do you want to share the idea? Are you hoping it will change something? Are you banking on it making you famous? Is it, do you think, the key to the future of humanity? Do you want to steer people in a certain direction? Why? What’s the point? What exactly are you hoping to achieve and receive by sharing this idea?

Getting at the reason for sharing your idea is a process of exploration and discovery. And when you’ve got even an inkling of that reason, grab onto it!

Lock it into your mind when you begin work on your piece, as finding it in the middle is near impossible. As a matter of fact, without it most writers would get lost and give up. Many are the times I have seen would-be, potential, and even experienced writers, who have great ideas, lots of experience and resources, and many stories to tell reach this stage and give up. They start like gangbusters, write a paragraph or chapter, lose focus on their purpose either because life gets in the way or simply because they follow a misleading path in their writing. They get to an impasse and can't remember why they started this project in the first place. They re-read what they've written and finding no cogent meaning or purpose, toss it. The ideas—however great they may have been—are now forever lost.

If you're committed to writing your piece, holding onto the reason for sharing your idea in the midst of writing is difficult, but not impossible. Writers will sometimes put a note near their writing table to remind them of their purpose, their audience, their goal. Or they may choose to consult an editor (cheerleader) or writing partner or coach, who knows their purpose and helps them return to it when they get lost in their own words.

Music to Their Ears or Scratching Nails Across a Chalkboard?

Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade just as painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them. Then rearrange the rules to suit yourself.

—TRUMAN CAPOTE (AMERICAN AUTHOR, 1924–1984)

Equipped with an idea, your experience, and a clear purpose, the final hurdle before reaching your reader is developing the skills and technique to portray your idea. Doing so in a voice with which you are comfortable speaking and to which they will receptively listen is a challenge. There are as many voices on the subject of business, coaching, and leadership as there are books on the subject. And, as mentioned previously, there is ample number of these. Some voices are smooth, gentle, kind, and compassionate. Some are abrupt, disconcerting, rude, and disheartening. Some are quick, mercurial, light, and humorous; some stately, reserved, intellectual, and calm. All are different, just like people. Which voice is *yours*?

One of the most exquisite writers I know won't put pen to paper anymore. Trained, schooled, and even published as a writer, he says it has become too excruciating for him to find the right words. So, for now, he has made the choice not to write at all, leaving it to the rest of us to contribute to the global pool of knowledge. Another writer I enjoy immensely takes such care in his writing that

it is a veritable masterpiece composed of individual parts. It is like a building. If one beam (even a punctuation mark!) is removed, it can upset his entire structure. Other writers are less meticulous. They may throw words on a page that relate to their chosen subject (or even speak them into a recording device and have them transcribed), and then rely on a heavy-handed editor to make it accessible to their audience. None of these methods are right or wrong; they just are. They are what work for the writers; these are their established voices. This is how they speak in writing.

A voice is established through trial and error—through writing, sharing the work, and withstanding the inevitable critiques and responses that come from sharing. You see, a good writer may be born, but great writers are made. And, the fact is, they are made by asking for, learning from, following up, and growing from readers' feedback. Just like leaders.⁴

In my experience, writers, both novice and practiced, who ask for others' responses and opinions of their works, and who are open to integrating that feedback, find it much easier to develop an amenable leadership voice that others can hear and one from which readers desire to listen and learn. These are all leadership qualities; good leaders all have the potential to become great leadership writers.

Conclusion

Finally, a few tips of the trade for those of you interested in pursuing writing on leadership.

1. Research your subject: explore it on the Internet, at the library, in your daily life, and with friends, colleagues, and family. You cannot know too much about it.
2. Keep writing even when you feel discouraged or feel that the writing isn't going anywhere. It is probably fine; you're likely just having an insecurity attack. Write through it; ask for feedback; do some research. Don't give up.
3. Start with an outline. Otherwise, don't start with an outline. Everyone has a different approach. Find the one that works for *you*.
4. The paragraph, chapter, sentence, or thought that you labor over longest and feel most strongly about is the one that will inevitably be cut. Make peace with that. If you are so attached to it, save it and use it somewhere else.
5. Set a time to write every day; write even when you don't want to. It doesn't have to be much. It doesn't have to be astounding. It just has to keep you connected. In other words, just do it!

And if all this sounds too difficult, too arduous a task to take on at this moment, then consider Socrates:

Employ your time in improving yourself by other men's writings, so that you shall gain easily what others have labored hard for.

—*Socrates (Ancient Greek philosopher, 469 BC–399 BC)*

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