The Weakness of Strong Leaders:

Crowding Out Space for Collective Purpose

By Debbie Bing

Many have written extensively about the role of a strong leader in achieving an organization's vision and purpose. Equally many have explored the dynamics surrounding weak leaders and the organizations that must excel in spite of them. This article explores the paradoxical case where both are simultaneously true: the leader has precisely the vision, aggression and talent that the external environment demands, but, ironically, that strength and aggression weakens his or her team and atrophies others' ability to effectively advance the organization's purpose and goals.

At the surface, the leader's centrality galvanizes the organization and team around a shared purpose, as each member is drawn in by the leader's dogged commitment to achieving the organization's goals above all else. Similarly, many from the outside consider these organizations exceedingly successful. The dark side of this galvanizing leadership, however, is that the leader has "crowded out" the space needed for the organization and its members to learn and grow in order to collectively and sustainably achieve the organization's goals.

When a leader occupies the vision space so singularly, others on the team become overly dependent on the leader to advance purpose, often at the cost of their own ownership and authentic commitment to it. As a result, the organization is ill-prepared to succeed in the long term and build the distributed talent and resilience necessary to powerfully advance its mission in a challenging external environment.

I explore these dynamics through the lens of two consultancy cases. In each case, I lay out the challenges present in the external environment and the leader's unique skill set for responding effectively; I then explore the dynamics of the team and the ways in which "crowding out" of the space between the team and leader diminishes good thinking, cohesion around purpose and development. Finally, I look at the dilemmas inherent in the consultants' role when trying to help put needed space back into the system to leverage the strength of the leader *and* unleash untapped talent in the top team. The challenges that I explore from the perspective of an outside consultant mirror similar challenges for those in internal consulting roles as well as for internal team members.

The Two Cases

Each of the organizations described below is "mission driven" in the sense that they are focused on purpose and are not profit-maximizers. Their names are kept confidential, but both are well-recognized within their geographic areas. They each have a strong and visionary leader at the helm and share issues of dependency between the leader and his team.

Organization A

"James" is the executive director of a large not-for-profit social services organization in a rapidly developing city in the United States. It gets funds from local governments in the region, private contributions, federal programs and families able to pay on a sliding scale of fees. The agency delivers a range of family- and child-oriented services, such as mental health centers, well-baby clinics, primary medical care delivered by nurse practitioners and after-school tutoring.

James is particularly proud of the unit he has developed that does quality research on service delivery, helping to inform the directors of the different services and providing consultation to other agencies throughout the country. James is uniquely skilled at making sure these services are financially strong. James' board supports him, though they worry about what some call his "cowboy style of management." At the time of our consultation, James was planning to expand the reach of the organization partly by acquiring some freestanding family service organizations and partly by establishing new facilities. The finances of even the best social service agencies are always at risk, and if the economy turns down, tax revenues fall, federal spending drops or donors face too many competing demands for their philanthropic dollars, expenses can quickly exceed revenues. There is not too much room for sloppy performance or strategic miscalculation.

Organization B

"Karl" is the new director of a for-profit educational services company on the West Coast of the United States that provides various educational support and childcare services. The organization was established many years ago as part of an effort to privatize these kinds of services in for-profit models to encourage independence and fiscal strength. Prior to his role, Karl was a professor who published original research on innovative educational services to low-income families and had consulted in the past to the organization he now heads. He has a strong reputation among his academic peers throughout the country. He is also the first director in quite some time that did not come from a service provider role, and many are watching carefully with hope or skepticism to see if he can translate his academic expertise into results when faced with the challenges of a "real" system.

Within the first month of his arrival, the organization is criticized publicly in the press for several specific decisions made five years prior to his arrival. Throughout the course of his first six months in the job, there are three safety incidents at the organization's educational centers, the last of which is a particularly horrific story where it is clear the staff had some culpability. As a result, morale is at an all-time low and public scrutiny at an all-time high.

In both cases, I have been drawn to the organization's commitment to purpose, and the glue that it seemingly created. Both leaders created high caliber top teams, with several members who were motivated to leave other organizations in order to work with *this* leader on the goals he espoused. In both cases, I have also been troubled by the damaging impact that their leadership styles have had on their teams and puzzled by a gap between the raw talent in other leaders and the productivity and quality of work on the team. ➤

Three Relationship Boundaries that Heighten Dynamics

A key aspect of leadership is the way a leader exhibits his or her authority in key arenas and how he or she creates the context in which others can find theirs (Hirchhorn, 1997). In making sense of these specific cases, I turned to three key relationship "boundaries" where these leaders exhibit their authority: the external environment, their top teams and the consultant. Each of these relationships represents the possibility of dynamic interaction leading to increased learning, reflection and impact on purpose.

In these two cases, each one becomes a platform for the leader to become increasingly singular in his authority and action. He is perceived as rigid in his point of view and ultimately overly personally identified with the actions of the organization, crowding out the space in which creative interaction can generate the authority of others that leads to a resilient organization. I explore each of these three relationship boundaries in more depth below, with a particular emphasis on the team and the consultant. Table 1 below summarizes key ideas about these boundaries.

The External Environment-Leader Boundary

Both James and Karl are highly confident and competent leaders, with great belief in their convictions about what is right for the organization. This is not surprising given the high-pressured environment that each operates within. At the same time, this self-perception leads each to a potentially exaggerated picture of his indispensability, which can have damaging effects on the leader's ability to imagine that the team could be capable without him. Similarly, each casts himself as the protector of the organization in a hostile environment, leading to an overly rigid insulation from external partners sympathetic to the mission that could be allies to the leader.

Karl operates in a system of contractors and advocates, each with a key role in contributing to the service provided by his organization. While, intuitively, these external partners should be allies in advancing the organization's mission and goals, Karl often experiences them as added pressure in an already hostile environment. In many of the change initiatives in response to the safety incidents, he has been reluctant to engage his external partners in dialogue, worried that they would undermine the direction he knows they need to go rather than provide a source of good thinking that might strengthen the ultimate solution.

TABLE 1: THREE KEY BOUNDARIES

Boundary	Characteristics	Dynamics
External Environment	Exceedingly high pressure in the external environment Advisory mechanisms (board or public authority) actively paying attention and worrying about performance Matters of life and death at stake (lives of children or patients)	Leader sees himself as protector of the organization against the outside world Leader cares passionately about legacy, purpose and impact, leading to a deep personalization of the external environment's perception of the organization and its performance; any criticism is experienced as a personal attack High tolerance for managing in the midst of ambiguity in the external environment (staying in "divergent mode") to leave options open Leader is overly cautious about engagement of outsiders (board or external partners), wanting to carefully pace and control sharing of information and open less opportunities for exposure or "vulnerability"
The Team	Fairly large top team with the "system in the room" — key boundaries across the organization represented Talented individuals with strong individual track records	Huge amount of energy trying to "mind read" the leader (vs. thinking on their own) Over-dependence on leader to hold and advance organizational purpose, leading to distancing of others and decreased feeling of potency Backchannel, leader-focused gossip is ubiquitous, often at the cost of productive, work-focused interaction Peer-to-peer protection exhibited in team settings, rather than pushing or holding each other accountable; result is often debate with the leader alone rather than productive team debate across multiple points of view Differences in points of view often suppressed both in team settings and outside the team, leading to less interdependence (even when the work requires it) and more singular action under the radar screen of others Select "favorites" take risks on behalf of the group, speaking "truth to power" and/or putting issues into play about the effectiveness of the team and choices of the leader, yet the impact is often the opposite — discharging a tension that might be more developmental if it could be taken up by the group Targeted individuals figure out how to "work" the leader offline, getting cover and advice
The Consultant	Use of a close, trusted adviser over a fairly long period of time Primary task of consultant not project-oriented, more broadly mandated to help the leader and team be effective Consultant at risk of ritualized "truth to power" comments that are not developmental since the group exports this work to the consultant, feeling it is increasingly impossible to take it up as a team member.	Massive amount of triangulation (consultants seen as able to influence the leader in ways internal team members feel unable to) Over-functioning of the consultant, often getting pulled in as a "player" instead of a "coach" (Bowen 1974) Periodic resentment of the consultant by other members of the team when he or she is perceived to be validated or appreciated in ways that internal team members are not

Ironically, he has said that he *does* believe that these partners have more innovative ideas than you can find inside the organization, yet he is still reluctant to engage them. This suggests that his fear of giving up influence and/or his deeply held belief that he alone holds the answers overtake his openness to outside ideas even when he trusts the source of them.

James carefully manages his board of directors and has been criticized by several board chairs for holding them at a distance rather than enlisting them in good debate about direction and strategy. Nonetheless, his tendency is to script board meetings and overly prescribe presentations by his leadership team, leaving less room to invite them into challenges and problem solving. He has expressed that his reluctance to engage them in this way is a fear of being boxed in by potentially impetuous reactions, not trusting them to be measured and thoughtful about the complexities of operational and strategic challenges.

In each of these cases, there is little distinction between the "hostile" external environment (e.g., competition, a difficult market, the press) and closer-in external partners who would naturally share the organization's purpose. Each leader sees his role as protector and guardian and shuts out a potential source of input and shared leadership. The leader is increasingly central and seems to hold a perhaps unconscious belief that it is up to him and him alone to deliver the impact necessary for success. Perhaps more importantly, the instinct to protect rather than engage external partners obstructs the further development and visibility of a shared identity and purpose that is bigger than any one leader or organization. In this sense, purpose becomes overly captive to the leader.

The Team-Leader Boundary

The absence of reflective space in the top team has the most lasting and often detrimental impact. To be fair, the impact is co-created by the team and the leader, although it is often perceived to be largely about the style of the leader. "Crowding out" takes shape in a number of ways, each with its own manifestations.

A Viscous Cycle of Disappointment

The perceived space between the capability of the leader and the capability of the team grows bigger and emptier as they are caught in a viscous cycle: a) the leader is ahead of the team; b) team members feel incompetent, under-authorized or not listened to and they withdraw; c) the leader becomes increasingly convinced that others are not up to the job and, therefore, over-functions; and d) others withdraw further, believing they will never get the authorization they need to be successful. Rather than purpose serving as a higher order goal that motivates collective performance, it gets set as a high bar, which team members compete to reach as the leader adjudicates performance.

As he pushes for growth, James is understandably concerned about the caliber of his senior staff. He has often expressed offline that he has little confidence in one of his directors who heads the primary care service and suggested that this individual does not have the ability to think and work strategically. This director is intimidated by James, and, as a result, he prepares rigorously for meetings with him yet always feels that he misses the mark in their discussions. In team meetings where he presents to the team, James has been known to refer to the director's contributions as "out there." As this director's anxiety increases, his performance decreases. James increasingly signals his lack of confidence in this director by taking decisions or tasks away from him and making decisions about his area based on counsel from others whom he trusts more.

The director of primary care becomes angrier and begins to express that, despite his efforts, he'll never get it right with James. At a critical juncture, James decides to replace him. Unfortunately, the lack of reflection about these interactions and the way they have built over time lead to both of them taking very different messages away from this decision. James believes he has made a necessary change in a key leader over a critical strategic area, while his director believes that he never had a chance to succeed. Others watch this interaction from the sidelines and express offline that they need to make sure to "stay in line" by figuring out exactly what James has in mind and making it happen. It shifts the energy from increased purposefulness to compliance with the leader.

Lack of Productive Debate

There is little to no reflective space for learning and development of the team and organization because the anxiety produced through group and individual interactions with the leader stilts the openness and productive vulnerability necessary for learning and growth. This dynamic creates a rigid adherence to a stated purpose, as represented and advanced by the leader, rather than authentic engagement that is deepened by the rich back and forth created by a productive team.

One of the innovative practices that James has into place to engage the whole system in monitoring performance are semi-annual reviews across key performance metrics. The stated intention of these reviews is to increase the speed of applying good strategic thinking by pooling multiple insights and thinking together as a team about possible interventions. James hopes these reviews will be an occasion for learning, but, in reality, the tenor is more punitive. Directors often report a feeling of being "called out on the carpet" in front of their peers. The discussion is experienced as being purely a mechanism for accountability rather than sense-making and joint strategizing.

The space disappears for productive exploration of differences within a team — in role, point of view and skill — since the dynamic becomes overly focused on one-on-one interactions between the leader and individuals, while others refrain from pushing one another to protect each other from exposure. An unstated norm develops that "I won't raise any issue with a peer if you don't raise issues with me," so those with the insight about a substantive issue is likely to hold back, leaving it to the leader to drive the thinking. This is exacerbated by turbulence in the external environment, which makes internal cohesion around purpose both more important and more difficult to achieve (McCann & Selsky, 2012).

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Team Members Undervalue Their Own Strengths

Team members elevate the leader as the protector of mission and undervalue their own strengths. The leader becomes the sole strategist, authority and negotiator, resulting in team members being depleted in those dimensions. As the space for their own skill, ambition and authority is diminished, they become increasingly dependent.

Across all of these examples, the leader has been guided by his instinct about what the organization needs to succeed and a too tightly held position that he is the one with the true sense of the mission. Ironically, neither Karl nor James intends to de-skill their team in the process. They have even said that the process of thinking with an audience or interacting one-on-one with individuals helps them become clearer in their convictions about the best way forward. Similarly, team members testify that the leader's instincts are spot on and his ambitious vision has brought the organization to where it is. Yet it is this dynamic that threatens the team's and organization's development by de-authorizing team members.

Successful team development requires an ability to harness one's authority from multiple levels in the hierarchy (Hirschhorn, Gilmore, & O'Connor, 1993), and the top leader must consciously and actively work to generate and build the authority of others. In the absence of explicit effort to give authority away so that others may experience both the risk and the responsibility of taking it, talented individuals and teams lose touch with their own skill and spend too much of their energy orienting their own actions around a powerful leader on a mission.

> Strong leaders care deeply about the success and longevity of the organization and mission they serve.

The lack of team space can also lead to lower quality decision making because the leader is insulated from divergent points of view that might add helpful insight or information. James Surowiecki writes about the "wisdom of crowds" and illustrates how collective information often leads to more accurate answers (Surowiecki, 2004). When leaders even inadvertently "close the boundaries" to differences, they shut themselves off from information, reinforce current practices and behaviors and roles become encrusted rather than functional (Agazarian, 1997).

The Consultant-Leader Boundary

The consultant, whether external or internal, faces several dilemmas about how to help an organization change these dynamics. The challenge is shaping and advising the leader to change his or her behavior when some of the same dysfunctional characteristics are helping push the organization in the "right" direction demanded by the external environment. What are the techniques for re-invigorating the confidence and capability of teams in partnership with their leader? How can you create structures and processes that put "transitional space" into the organization — for reflection, learning and harnessing the power of differences — without overexposing members of the team in the transition? And how can the leader shrink the space between his or her own ability and that of the members of the team in order to make space for continuity and development that will ultimately make the organization successful in the long run?

All of this becomes even more complicated because the consulting relationship gets drawn into the dynamic. This happens in several ways. First, the team triangulates between the consultant and the leader in the hopes that the consultant can influence or "fix" the leader in ways they feel unable to. In Karl's organization, we forged productive working relationships with several people on his top team. During the course of several years of work with them on targeted initiatives, we would periodically get a call from some subset of three or four team members. We could predict the request even before it was made, which was always some version of "We've got some concerns about how the team is working together. We think it's time for a retreat." Yet these requests always hoped for a changed dynamic rather than a substantive outcome. The challenge then became how to play our role in a way that built the internal capacity to create the space while minimizing expectations that we would change or "fix" the leader.

Second, the consultant overfunctions by becoming a player in a parallel dynamic with the leader rather than maintaining the boundary of a coaching role consulting to the dynamic. For example, we had designed a meeting with James' top team with a goal of engaging the team in a thoughtful discussion about political developments in the city and state that could affect their funding and growth. It was a great opportunity to open up the strategist space beyond James. We had designed a highly structured meeting with several opportunities for small group work, which we had run by James in advance, knowing his propensities. Five minutes before the meeting, he walked in and informed us that he had changed the agenda and format of the meeting, thus hijacking the meeting design entirely. We were left feeling undervalued and ineffective, enacting the same dynamic felt by his team.

Third, team members who feel undervalued resent the consultant because he or she is perceived to be valued and validated in ways that internal team members are not. As a result, a perception grows that interpersonal connectedness is a substitute — and perhaps even more valued — than the glue and shared competence created by shared purpose.

In these examples, the consultant becomes part of the dynamic that, over time, damages any ability to consult to it. There are several possible interventions to help put needed space back into the leader/team interaction and place shared purpose back at the center of energy and effort with challenging, strong leaders such as Karl and James.

Possible Interventions

The dynamic of strong leaders like these test my own insights and skills as a consultant. Similar to their teams' experience, I have often felt that every success is just temporary. It does not feel possible or even advisable to try to change the leader's character. That same character has provided guidance and strength that has made the organization successful. Interventions worth pursuing create space for the leader himself by focusing on behavior, practice and experimentation rather than character or style. Each of the following interventions attempts to help team members find voice and channel their skills in new ways, thus opening space to enhance both their own sense of competence and their own potency relative to their organization's purpose.

Create Deliberate Reflective Space

Consultants can be powerful agents for productively unleashing insights team members have but are not saying. The challenge is to build the reflective capacity of the leader and the team rather than simply being triangulated. One method we used with Karl's team was to create a structure and process where different rotating members played observer roles and would critique interactions and dynamics in meetings with a structured, mandatory reflective debrief by the observers. This process was a forcing mechanism to have the kind of discussion the team could be having in the course of its everyday work. They agreed to add a few minutes of "mandatory debrief" to their standing team meetings to create ongoing space for reflection. In later weeks, the team reflected that this small practice had given them a mechanism to reconnect with each other around the shared purpose and their individual and collective skills to achieve it.

Use Large Group Design Techniques to Break Normal Patterns

Strong leaders often feel more comfortable in a large group discussion because it keeps them central and provides stimulus. At the same time, this same dynamic crowds out the space for good thinking, debate, expression of differences and developmental risk taking. Alternative configurations for group discussions such as pairs, triads and small groups can create different boundaries in a discussion and lead to more engagement and thoughtful work (Gilmore and Bing, 2006). Without exception, however, when we have been able to persuade a leader to go in this direction, the discussion yields more innovative ideas, productive discussion and engagement. The leader becomes an observer or facilitator rather than controller at all times.

Link the Need for Different Behavior to a Higher-Level Goal of the Leader

Strong leaders care deeply about the success and longevity of the organization and mission they serve. While this caring contributes to many of the leader-focused dynamics discussed here, it also creates an opening for a consultant. Succession and legacy depend on the future success of other leaders and on an ability to institutionalize the skill and vision that is often held closely at the top. With James, we used his desire for an effective eventual succession and his deep commitment to sustaining the mission to open up space for thinking about the development of others.

At the beginning, this was not an easy conversation and, in fact, served as a source of despair as his lack of confidence in others became even clearer. Over time, however, these discussions triggered feelings of vulnerability as he got in touch with and expressed his fear about a potential lack of meaning and purposefulness when he no longer had the job of leading and what would happen to the organization's singleness of purpose when he was no longer there. This opened up reflective space about what he might do when he was not at the helm and, in turn, created the space to think reflectively about the impact of his behavior on his team and its growth trajectory. Just imagining a time when he would not be at the center forced him to think in a different way about those who might be.

Linking to legacy and succession does not turn the tide magically, but it does have the potential to build the reflective capacity of the leader, which we believe is a prerequisite for developing a team and organization. When leaders recognize that their role as "sole visionary" will obstruct the organization's success over time, the wish to share that space with others grows.

Help Team Members Build the Skills for Working with Leader Styles

In my consulting work, team members have often reflected that they are not able to change the leader, as it is better just to retreat to their corners and work under the radar or work around them. Rather, there is often room for their own skill development for interacting with the leader more productively. There are ways to be productively tough on team members and coach them to take risks in their interactions with leaders, put more of themselves into the discussion and perhaps, most importantly, explicitly reflect on their performance after difficult incidents.

Similarly, coaching a team member to prepare in different ways for their interactions with a leader, such as thinking about what they want and need out of a discussion, imagining the typical leader response, and then thinking about how to move beyond that response, can be very helpful. Consultants can help team members engage rather than withdraw, and as long as there is enough trust in the leader to be open to a periodic push from team members, it is one way to break the vicious cycle of aggression and withdrawal between a leader and team.

Create Space, Literally

Another strategy is to create space for the team to do specific work without the leader present. Often the team interaction without the leader present allows members to reconnect with their own sense of purpose and their competence rather than depending on the leader to do that. Karl created a temporary task force — made up of his top team — to respond to a specific challenge from a funder. James used an extended vacation as an occasion for the team to accomplish a strategic piece of work together while he was gone. Ultimately, the goal is to have teams work this way with the leader present, but it is a way of mobilizing a traumatized team.

Conclusion

In his article, "The Task of Leadership," Kenneth Eisold noted a trend in self-help leadership books that implicitly suggest that leaders must figure out on their own what to do (Eisold, 1997). Students of systems and organizations know deeply that part of leadership is authorizing teams and multiple parts of the system to play their part in success. This paper has focused on strong leaders — with the vision and skill to author their own books on successful leadership — whose very strength can lead directly to weak systems and a lack of distributed authority and development. Richard Jeffries wrote that "nothing grows in the shadow of a great oak" (Jeffries, 1884), and we see that to be true again and again in organizations. As consultants to these leaders, our challenge is to use our own experience of this dynamic to help put needed space into the organization for development and learning. It is not an uncomplicated challenge, but a worthy one. Ultimately, this may contribute to a more powerful achievement of mission and purpose over time, even in the most challenging settings. P&S

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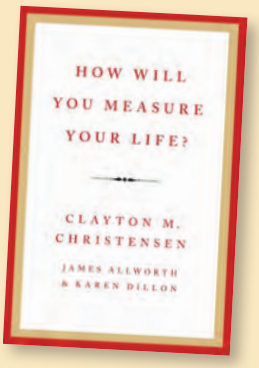

How Will You Measure Your Life?

Authors: Clayton M. Christensen, James Allworth and Karen Dillon

Publisher: HarperCollins

Reviewer: Terry Beliann

In his latest book, the celebrated Harvard professor Clay Christensen migrates away from his traditional business-oriented works, including "Innovator's Dilemma," where he challenges business leaders and entrepreneurs to be introspective on their business, strategy or products. Now, he redirects his focus to the individual ¬— challenging us individually to think about the quality of our lives and our happiness. With this shift, his new book, "How Will You Measure Your Life?," falls more in the self-help genre and may be a disappointment for readers looking for innovative business or strategy concepts.

Christensen has seen many of his former students and classmates at Harvard Business School pursue careers and lifestyles focused on "chasing the money." He has witnessed a high level of unhappiness and, in some cases, criminal activity that resulted from their decisions. As a result, he has written this book to encourage an alternate path. While the book is focused on examining personal values and is self-help by nature, I was pleasantly surprised with his ability to leverage business theory and practice as a framework for evaluating our personal and family values. Additionally, his message did not come across as a re-tread of rah-rah platitudes siding with the easy or quick fix; rather, he focuses on the sacrifice and hard work necessary to achieve a rewarding balance in your personal life.

This book would be great for someone who has not spent time considering the value and benefits to a work-life balance. It is also a good refresher for self-examination. The content of the book clearly targets working professionals with younger families. He has committed a considerable amount of content to his thoughts on child rearing and how to be a good spouse.

He frames all of his "advice" with business stories and experiences. He discusses companies such as Dell, Ikea, Honda, Pixar and Netflix and draws a parallel to key learnings on child rearing and creating a happy family culture. The stories are useful in promoting a commitment to family life and are interesting and insightful. Many reiterate concepts and ideas from Christensen's earlier works, and some stories resonate better than others. Some stories, however, such as outsourcing at Dell as it relates to outsourcing the raising of your children — feel disjointed.

The book is broken into three parts. In part 1, "Finding happiness in your career," Christensen revisits traditional theories of motivation and discusses why so many professionals pursue high-paying careers. He focuses on Frederick Herzberg's two-factor theory and the pursuit of the hygiene factors (e.g., money, benefits, vacation) versus motivating factors (e.g., challenging work, increasing responsibility, recognition) as the major cause. In part 2, "Finding happiness in your relationships," he discusses family relationships, personal values and the need to give our relationships the same level of (if not more) commitment and time that we give our career. Finally, in part 3, "Staying out of jail," he discusses living a life of integrity and being unwavering in your commitment to your "center." He focuses on his deeply rooted religious beliefs and his "all in" dedication to his personal values.

Overall, the book is a good, quick read. It's a good refresher for self-examination, it will provide a few aha moments and it's a good representation of Christensen's value system and personal life. However, those looking for the specific answer to the question of how to measure your life will likely be disappointed; Christensen prefers to ask the question to get us thinking and provide some guidance based on his experiences and values rather than provide specific instructions.

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