

# On Leadership

A keynote speech by Deborah Szekely, founder of the Golden Door  
and co-founder Rancho La Puerta

Thank you for your gracious introduction. My husband used to say, when people would introduce him in glowing terms: “You tempt me to become a follower of myself.” But since I know myself so well, I’ve decided I’m not tempted at all...

When I heard about your meeting’s “leadership” theme, I thought of Shakespeare’s famous line from *Twelfth Night*:

"Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them"

Actually I feel that very few great leaders are *born* leaders. Most are self-made, often when it is thrust upon them. There comes a point when many hands are needed to achieve a result. Although the leader in training might have preferred to work alone, time was of the essence and he or she could not do it alone. You may have started one of the world’s largest electronics firms in a garage by experimenting alone at your workbench, but eventually you decide you need help ... that you can’t do it all alone.

And so, leadership develops step by step and you discover yourself climbing the ladder rung by rung.

Of course leading others to excellence must begin with leading yourself to excellence. This must be a leitmotif in any talk about leadership. It begins with your commitment to your own excellence. Everything else follows.

I’m told that I am a leader, a mentor, a guru ... all kinds of nice things. But being a leader is nothing I set out to be. Once you reach the decision that two hands working 7/24 can’t get the job done, once you hire your first person, you’ve taken the first step toward building a team, and you are on the way up. A good leader is first and foremost a team builder. Everything you get done will be because of that team.

For me the key to a good leader is that person’s ability to choose. John Paul Sartre best defines my thoughts about choice, and I will paraphrase him:

“In the end both what you chose to do, and what you chose not to do, weigh equally...they are of equal importance.”

I add to this a motto I’ve used so many times in my talks to my guests: When you must choose, take the measure of everything as either *life-enhancing* or *life-diminishing*. These are the four most important words I can give you. Life enhancing. Life diminishing.

A leader must have the courage to choose; it is our choices that define our lives. It also helps to have what the Marines call ‘fire in the belly’ —the need to get things done. Choose to be a leader, either out of desire or necessity. Or have it thrust upon you. Or choose to be led. Whatever you do, realize that our freedom to choose is the most precious gift of all.

Once I was asked to describe myself. I thought for a moment and said, “Well, first and foremost, I am curious.” Curiosity defines me. I’m always wondering *why*.

Secondly, I have courage. I don’t know how else to put it, but the men at the Golden Door’s Men’s Weeks call it “balls.” I’m not afraid of failing, and besides I’m experienced at making lemonade out of lemons.

And third, I have a strong sense of wonder. This is an incredible world, filled with incredible creatures (including mankind)! When you see a liquidambar tree whose leaves are uncurling in spring sunlight, stop and watch. You can almost see them unfolding with new life...and creating their own form of wonder as they seem to worship their life-giver, the sun. I fill my life with moments of wonder. And then there is the most wondrous thing of all—the

body, my body, that absolutely miraculous machine that I listen to and respect.

Another trait comes to mind—and it’s a real advantage if you have it. Leaders feel a sense of responsibility. In my case, it went far beyond simply taking care of my guests. Very early on in the 1940s I felt the weight of the 400 families in the town of Tecate that depended on me for food and shelter. That sense of duty made me grow up fast—very fast.

Then there was—and there will ever be—that urge to be the best. And the Ranch and the Golden Door, each in their own way, are the very best in their field. It was never about money. It was always about the urge to create and to excel, and that urge is as strong as ever.

Now, since you’re sitting here today, I’m assuming you’re leaders, and it is the result of your hard work and total focus...and without a doubt a good many 18- to 20-hour days.

Yet here’s your dilemma. Every leader is a better leader if he or she is *healthy*. Leadership is a matter of stamina and reflection. You must maintain your health in all aspects of life. It can’t be a just a matter of stamina alone; it involves a special kind of energy in true abundance that enables you to do your work and at the same time step back and look at the big picture. To redefine and reinvent—two things always expected of good leaders—takes health, flexibility, and resilience.

Ultimately, good health allows you to feel inspired—something that seldom happens when you’re worn out, sick, or just “making do.”

I think of Mimi Guarneri, who just spoke to you. The Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine here in San Diego, which we’re so proud of, combines ancient wisdom traditions with up-to-the-minute research-based medicine. It was inspired by Mimi, a leader who saw the need and went about filling it.

What Mimi is doing today would have been considered a pipe dream a few decades ago. Donors and investors back then would have asked, “Sister, what are you smoking?” and walked away.

That certainly was what skeptics asked us in 1940, when my husband Edmond Szekely and I welcomed out first guests to Rancho La Puerta for \$17.50 a week, “bring your own tent.” We all camped beneath the oak and sycamore trees. We went against the grain when we said that you didn’t have to be old in your 50s and expect to die in your 60s. Making the connection between longevity and lifestyle choices was not part of the zeitgeist in those days.

Yet the time was right for something new. Leadership always means being first, staying ahead with ideas and actions. Today I hope to renew your confidence in ideas ... no matter how strange they may be to those of little faith. Championing a new idea of any kind requires chutzpah and stamina.

On your seats you will find a facsimile of a three-part newspaper article written about Rancho La Puerta in 1949. When I first read the articles, I cried. The reporter called us a cult, and ridiculed us for our “strange” ideas. Today, we’re looked upon as prophets. And it is true, for 60 years ago we advocated regular exercise, especially walking and hiking. We championed eating fresh foods grown in gardens free of artificial fertilizers and pesticides. Soil must be healthful—alive with beneficial organisms. We recommended brief exposure to the sun to maintain levels of Vitamin D. And in everything we sought a balance of mind, body and spirit.

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When I was thinking about this talk, I wondered what in 70 years of experience working with guests at the Ranch and 50 years at the Golden Door were the most important things, in a nutshell, that I could say that would result in you going home, remembering, and making part of your daily lives.

There is a reason that the Ranch and Golden Door have the highest returnee factor of any resorts anywhere, anyplace. It’s this: a lesson is well learned when it becomes part of someone’s life.

Our guests learn to *think* about what goes on underneath their skin...to understand and respect this irreplaceable machinery that is the enabler of all things.

Not just the body, but also the mind and spirit as well. The dreams and optimism ...all are colored by health: vibrant glorious health.

They learn to see their immune system as their best pal. They consider its well being as their own. They have begun to develop the habit of having conversations with their body.

And of course one part of the conversation is food. Food is life. There's no other way to define it. Stop eating and you'll find out. It may take awhile, but inevitably you will see food not only as fuel to be pumped like gas at a gas station, but food as part of your social well being. That's why I'm pleased to give you my latest cookbook today, and I hope it will be soon dog-eared and splattered with tomato juice on your kitchen counter.

Food isn't your enemy. Worrying about what you eat shouldn't be an issue. I point out that the number one thing to remember is the size of the container, and the age...and eat accordingly. Counting calories is like counting kisses. You get so involved with counting you forget to appreciate what's going on.

You LIVE in your body, in your home. Honor it. Respect it. Don't fill it with what I call "smidgens"—tiny amounts of harmful substances and habits that you think are so small they can't hurt. You may only use a small envelope of imitation sugar in your coffee every day, but in a year these add up to 1,000 and in 10 years to 10,000 smidgens of the chemicals used to create that imitation sugar. Having the energy to be a great leader begins with a healthy body, and inevitably a healthy mind and spirit will follow.

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Also keep in mind that after you turn 50 there begins a gradual decrease in the body's ability to fully renew and regenerate itself—but unfortunately I didn't take this seriously until I was in my 80s.

Two years ago I had the good luck to stupidly fall and break three ribs. How can that be good luck? Because for the first time in my life I felt old, really old. For months I moved in pain and slept in a chair. I decided then and there that I was not in a hurry to get old. Of course, I will eventually, but I'm having too much fun and I'm really pleased with what I am doing now.

I reinvented myself as a 60 year old. I lost a few pounds, began a daily exercise program: Pilates on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Danny, my Navy Seal trainer, rings the bell at 6:00 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays and at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday. And I *am* 60—I live and work and party and play as though I was 60. The only real difference is my white hair and my wrinkles. Next Monday, I'll be 88, and my birthday gift to myself will be an additional exercise class – I have a week to decide if it will be yoga or gyrotionics.

So, from this talk there is another important point for you to take to heart. When you pass 60 exercising is no longer optional: it becomes a daily "must do".

The missing link in so many challenges in life is almost always the body. It is the enabler, and it tells us what to do. The sooner you learn to pay attention, the sooner you will benefit.

I began to expand this theory a few decades ago when one of my staff members complained of a headache. I asked her, "Why do you have a headache? This is a message your body is sending you. You don't want to slam the door. Ask it, 'am I dehydrated? Did I not get enough sleep? Did I fight with my best friend?'"

Then I told her to drink a glass of water and eat a handful of dried fruit. After an hour if you still have a headache, then go for the Tylenol. It worked. She didn't need the pills.

As a nation we just don't believe in any form of pain. We refuse to accept aches and pains ...so we pop a pill and think everything is okay. We may hide the pain from ourselves, but we ignore these messages from our bodies at our own peril. Aches and pains are the only way our bodies can communicate.

My day begins by saying “good morning!” to my body. The first thing, while still in bed, I stretch ...I really stretch and wiggle. *Try it, now – stand up* and stretch – don’t hit your neighbor. Now stretch again and wiggle, feel that tingle. It is your body as happy as a puppy dog wagging his tail. OK, now you can sit down.

As I get out of bed I greet the day with a loud, “Good morning!” Sending your expectations to the universe is like tossing a pebble into a still pond—the waves radiate outward, then return. A great “Good Morning!” is what you will get back.

When I speak to groups like this, one of the first questions I am usually asked is why did we settle and begin our spa in Mexico. Well, we were refugees from World War II before it was World War II. My husband and I are Jewish, and for us, the war had already begun. My husband was one of two Jews in his university class. He and his classmates were required to spend two weeks during two summers in military training. Thereafter they were classified as being in the Reserves. We were living in Hollywood when he was ordered by the Romanian Army to report to fight for Hitler. This didn’t make a lot of sense, and since we were so far away, we ignored a series of letters from the Romanian Embassy. Then one came from the United States Immigration and Naturalization Department informing my husband that if he was found in the United States on June 1, 1940, he would be arrested as a deserter and shipped back as a felon to Romania. This got our attention!

We left the U.S. and arrived in Tecate in June, 1940, with 1,000 pounds—a check from my husband’s publisher in England. This was enclosed in a letter saying it was the last money they would be able to send. The letter suggested that he cut short his sabbatical and return to England and resume his duties as director of the British International Health and Education Center. Not very tempting! London was being bombed nightly with incendiaries and ships traveling from New York to South Hampton were being sunk on a regular basis by German U-boats.

Still, we were optimists: we didn’t think the war would last that long. We looked on what would be our new life in Mexico as an adventure. Starting a fitness revolution was not even a pipe dream.

Edmond was a respected philosopher and teacher and wrote about the Essenes of antiquity. Since he had ardent students in the States and in Great Britain, and was accustomed to teaching summer schools, he thought, “why not invite the students to join us for the summer and live as the Essenes of antiquity?” They lived a simple esthetic life on the shores of Lake Mareotis. We would live together as they did, growing our own vegetables, milking goats and making everything we need. He decided to call this the Essene School of Life, and we began what today would be called a commune. We charged \$17.50 a week and asked each guest to bring a tent, and work for 2 ½ hours a day. As the war dragged on we started building little adobes, and eventually purchased 30 large surplus packing crates, which we turned into tiny monk-like cabins.

We lived like the Essenes, rising with the birds, going to sleep with the moon....except I used kerosene lamps far into the night while I typed letters and transcripts of lectures.

The first building we built was our library, which also had room for a printing press. We promoted the knowledge of the ancients and in no time had 300 members who paid \$10 a year to receive our monthly news letter and a pamphlet based on one of my husband’s lectures.

How we became and why we became the number-one *fitness* resort was not of his choosing or mine. It was what the people wanted! They attended all of my exercise classes and cooking classes, worked unstintingly in the garden and helped with the goats. Eventually his lecture audiences diminished, and the fitness classes and activities grew.

I guess leadership means going where you’re supposed to go. It’s not just a matter of making lemonade out of lemons. It seemed the people eventually wanted their beds made and

didn't want to wash dishes...they would rather pay ... and so gradually the Ranch began to change.

I became an hotelier by obligation. It was inevitable. In other words, I'm telling all of you who are leaders not to fight the inevitable. IT COMES UPON YOU.

So, at any rate, my particular brand of leadership came about via fortuitous circumstance. As I grew older I began to think, "Everything I do and have done was meant to be." If Edmond Szekely had chosen most any other American girl but me, the Ranch would have been out of business very soon. It is a long story that I won't go into now, but I was a girl straight out of Brooklyn who lived for years in a plaited coconut-frond house on a beach in Tahiti, without electricity or water. Our outhouse was built over the lagoon. When I arrived at the Ranch I already had a can-do attitude and experience galore in surviving in primitive circumstances. This knowledge and the fact that I was a book worm and read every book on simple living, gardening, and health that I could lay my hands on were the building blocks for our future.

Since leadership is the theme today, I have to bring up risk taking. Leadership is never safe. Leadership means looking ahead, thinking ahead, planning ahead, and making choices. And someplace or other in this process you need to decide that the greater risk is doing nothing! You have to have faith in your goal, and that it is right and worthy of your principles.

An example:

Thirty-five years ago a man who was the head of California's highway department came to me and announced that the Golden Door was in the way of a new Interstate highway— Interstate 15. And since they didn't want a "business interruption" suit they were giving me years of notice to move. Someone in Sacramento had thought the Golden Door was nothing more than an old motel. I pointed out that during that very week Nancy Reagan was staying there. (Incidentally Nancy called Ronnie, horrified, and he responded that it was a federal highway and there was nothing he could do.)

Eventually the highway department gave me \$750,000. My CPA said I could close the Door, sell my mailing list and furnishings for another \$250,000, and I'd have a million dollars with which to live out the rest of my life comfortably and watch the clouds go by. I'd be on easy street. It was 1971.

My lawyer agreed. My best friends agreed.

I said no, I wouldn't even consider it! We had a mission: to make healthy people healthier. I used the money to build a new Golden Door about a mile away in a hidden canyon. The risk was great, but the rest is history.

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My choices were never about money. Leadership is not about money! Believe me... take Steve Jobs at Apple and the young men who created Google: for them it was always about creating something new that makes people's lives better ... that delights people.

To sum it all up, the word leadership is twin-ed with "responsibility." Once you accept that fact, you become a leader whether you intend to or not. You accept that you just happened to be the right person, at the right time, in the right place. The single force that makes you grow and grow is that you've accepted responsibility for the well being of yourself and all the people you touch.

Another key to effective leadership is managing your time well. Time is what we're made of. Each one of us is different, and how we use time makes up a good part of that difference.

I have a system that works for me, and I'd like to tell you about it. Everyone in this room has in their possession some form of calendar. Your calendar can be the essential tool you use to change your life. It costs nothing, just a wee bit of time to "calendar" looking at your calendar.

The best day of the week to do it is on your Sabbath. In the Bible we learn that after God created the earth and the heavens He rested, and He looked about and saw that "it was good."

Your Sabbath, whether it's a Saturday or Sunday, is a time when you should look about and see what was good in the previous week that you want *more* of, and what was bad that you want *less* of. Remember: life-enhancing, or life-diminishing.

Spend a half hour in bed or in the garden with your calendar and 5 colored pencils: black, blue, red, green and a favorite color unlike the others (for me, it's purple). If your calendar is inside a computer or iPhone, try to print it out.

Study your calendar with your feelings in mind—your true emotions. Cross out those things you should not have done—that were a waste of time—in black. Reconsider those in blue. Figure out how to finish those in red. Consider those that were truly life enhancing to be “greens.” And finally, mark your dreams, your favorites, and your most wonderful moments in the past week, with your favorite color.

What colors dominate your week? I hope that very soon it will be greens and purples.

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Leadership means recognizing that at various times of your life—and your family's or company's or community's lives—you come to the confluence of many rivers. At this point you choose to either be one of the drifters—to be content to hold your paddle rather than use it ... content to let the rivers take you where they will... which might mean going over the falls, or finding yourself spinning in an eddy for the rest of your life.

I prefer to paddle.

Aldous Huxley, a frequent guest to the Ranch in the old days, had a favorite saying: “Experience is how you use it.”

We all have experiences. Joyful. Painful. Arduous. Boring. Exciting. It's when we do something with those experiences that we become “experienced.” Leaders are experienced people. Teach yourself to turn a simple experience into the opportunity to *be experienced*.

Aldous also used to say, “Experience teaches only the teachable.” Are you one of the teachable? I believe that being teachable means being curious and open to new ideas. A leader must be curious... which by definition, I feel, means being open to the new.

I'd like to close with something I said 20 years ago when addressing a just-formed group of healers and health practitioners—the International Spa Association also known as ISPA, an organization that has grown to encompass thousands of members today, with a worldwide influence. We hoped to lead people toward a new paradigm of personal health. What we now know is that only a healthy world is one that can truly change.

I said to those assembled, “I fear I am somewhat of a Cassandra—I do not like the direction in which our nation and world are heading. If I were to have a message it would be to have faith in what you are doing, strengthening and educating people, cleaning up the environment, for the real struggle for the good life is only now beginning. Many years ago I studied Zen and read that the Zen masters divided the lifespan into three parts: the first third, growing up and getting an education; the second, devoted to marriage, children, money; and the third, the most important—the top of the ladder one might say—when you give something back from all that you received when you stood at the peak and could move in any direction you chose.” As I close this presentation, I feel the same today as I did then.

I hope you soon stand at that peak. Look out and choose wisely. If you have given yourself the opportunity to be a leader—both by honoring your own body and making the most of your experiences—I know you will choose wisely.

Thank you.