Leadership Lessons from Close Encounters

By Bill Hogue

Many of life’s most important leadership lessons happen when our sense of “normal” is challenged or disrupted. We’re forced to adapt, improvise, and invent new pathways for achieving our objectives. Where do we discover these leadership lessons? They’re not all contained between the covers of business bestsellers. They can come from just about anywhere. Maybe even from close encounters of the fourth kind. That’s what I discovered early in my career.
A beautifully appointed table laden with heavy hors d’oeuvres lay before me. Serving platters gleamed, tastefully integrated elements of a custom-designed set. To the left were elegant napkins, folded just so. The room was the finest I’d ever visited. I furtively glanced around, trying to figure out how people balanced napkin, fork, plate, wine, and conversation with some semblance of grace.

This was circa 1986, at a stunning brownstone in Back Bay Boston. My invitation was accidental, and my accepting it was a mistake. That was ever so clear to me as I surveyed the food and realized I had no idea what to eat. Most of this stuff was unidentifiable, and I had a rule about putting unidentifiable stuff in my mouth: don’t. My definition of heavy hors d’oeuvres was a can of mixed nuts with extra cashews, a box of Ritz Crackers, pimento cheese from the A&P, and little Vienna sausages slathered in BBQ sauce with plenty of toothpicks for spearing, maybe the kind with those festive shreds of cellophane attached to one end. That and a bucket of longnecks on ice make a pretty nice spread.

But somehow I’d crossed over into a parallel universe where Vienna sausages were neither seen nor discussed in polite company. The food before me looked artful and savory, but I hadn’t a clue about most of what I was seeing. I was dead certain I’d end up with asparagus or caviar or mushrooms or something equally suspicious on my plate.

I had a sinking feeling. If I was this anxious around the buffet, what on earth would my first conversation feel like? Perhaps I could get away without speaking to anyone. But how could I hide? There were only about fifty people circulating between two sumptuous rooms. This was dreadful, just dreadful, and I was barely in the door. When might I escape?

I refocused my attention on the buffet. Ahhh, something familiar, at last: plates of cheese and grapes. I eagerly reached forward—but time slowed, then halted. My hand went still in mid-flight, a bird with its mind gone blank.

This was no illusion. They were approaching, looming now in my peripheral vision. Walking. Toward. Me. Sherry Turkle. Seymour Papert. Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs?

With what felt like preposterous effort, I forced myself to turn my head in their direction so that I could focus more clearly. Sherry Turkle: media star and author of an influential book about the relationship of computer and self. Seymour Papert: gifted disciple of Jean Piaget, artificial intelligence theorist, inventor of the Logo computer programming language, and one of the godfathers of what would eventually become the MIT Media Lab. Steve Jobs. Well, what hasn’t been said now about Steve Jobs? On that day in 1986, the story of the final quarter-century of his life hadn’t yet been written. He was about three years younger than me. He’d already co-invented Apple and left it, under fire, then threw himself into the creation of NeXT. Turkle and Papert were hosting him as the guest of honor. The topics of the evening? The future of computing, the future of the self, and the future of both—computing and self—intertwined.

Who was I? Well, my overwhelming and paralyzing realization at that moment was that I wasn’t any of them. I was terrified, certain I was an impostor. What was I? A two-time college dropout (and eventual graduate) who had paid the rent by dressing mannequins as a stock boy in the Macy’s bra and girdle department, had served as a guinea pig for biochemical testing in the U.S. Army, had racked up all of seven years’ experience in computing, and was now a grad student at Harvard working with Project Athena at MIT. For me, computing and self were intertwined indeed, but not in the lofty philosophical way that Turkle, Papert, and Jobs were describing it.

What could I possibly say in a room that had so little oxygen left for someone like me?

While I was thinking about all of this, Jobs turned his head toward me and said, “The best grapes in the world come from a vineyard I know.” A quintessential Jobs comment—at once knowing, superior, and gnomic. The three of them cantered away, buoyed by their own beauty and energy, thoroughbreds to my dray horse. Or at least that’s how it seemed to me at the time.

I froze in the presence of three geniuses. Then the moment passed. I resumed my grazing at the buffet table and didn’t shame myself during the rest of the evening, as best as I can recall. From the periphery, huddled near my wife, I watched what looked to be several dazzling conversations among famous and semi-famous people I didn’t recognize then but whose work I came to know later. If I actually spoke to anyone, I don’t remember what I said.

friend recently handed me a book with a page clipped to remind me of a basic truth: nobody is thinking about you because everybody is too busy thinking about themselves—just like you are. Had I understood this truth in 1986, the evening might have taken a different course—or my life might have taken a different course. What a powerful leadership lesson! Unchecked fears will dictate behavior.

And here’s a corollary lesson: fears intensify when you imagine people are thinking about you. Back in 1986, I needed to get a grip on reality. Turkle, Papert, and Jobs didn’t know a thing about me, not even my name. Nobody knew my fears, nobody knew my past, and nobody could predict—or dictate—my future. I could have stepped forward and been big and bold and witty and insightful at that moment. That was the coin of the realm in this crowd. Instead, I chose to be my smallest self.

I understood all of this only years later. Back then, after my initial embar-
rassment faded, I treated my experience as a funny story to tell about how I went silent in the presence of Steve Jobs. But eventually the real lesson from this close encounter sunk in: fear controls if you allow it. So, you see, the evening was far from lost. Leadership lessons that yield new layers of meaning over time are the most valuable lessons of all. Yes, I froze, and I lost the opportunity to listen to and be heard by three people who were rewriting the rules of computers and society. But the bigger lesson from that close encounter resonates still today, twenty-eight years later.

Close encounter. Turkle, Papert, and Jobs were perhaps my first close encounter—at least the first that I consciously remember. What do I mean by close encounter? Well, let’s say you wake up tomorrow morning with an unshakable sense that your reality has shifted. That happens sometimes, right? We’ve all had the occasional morning when we’ve awakened from a particularly vivid dream feeling dislocated and/or wondering whether what we’ve just experienced was “real.”

Maybe it wasn’t a dream—and maybe it wasn’t “real” in the normal sense of what we usually define as reality. Maybe the experience was a close encounter of the fourth kind. A curtain has been pulled back to reveal what previously your eye could not see, nor your ear hear, tongue taste, nose scent, or skin touch. Your five senses have expanded into new dimensions. Your reality has been transformed.

Here’s the “big deal” about what happens in the aftermath of these close encounters. You can’t go back to your old reality. Your old reality is gone, kaput, finito. You’re stuck with either making sense of a new reality or falling apart. Or maybe a little of both.

I’m convinced that we have these close encounters all the time. The people we encounter—let’s call them transformative people—can cross our paths anywhere: at the grocery store, on the street, where we exercise, work, or worship, at the neighborhood bar, on a flight to our next vacation destination, around the colleges and universities where we dig through layers of accumulated knowledge and where we discover and create new knowledge. Transformative people share one attribute: they disrupt our sense of what is normal. The evidence is compelling.

As a younger man, I believed that each encounter with new ideas, new perceptions, was just that: an encounter. I hadn’t yet figured out the people angle. As a child coming of age in the 1960s, I thought disruption was normal, even though largely random, sometimes accidental, and often violent. Back then, I didn’t realize that some transformative people were disruptive on purpose and by design. I did not understand the concept until my first close encounter, when three people—Turkle, Papert, and Jobs—forced on me a personal transformation that continues to unfold today.

Once I became used to the idea of transformative people, I began to see them all around me. “Doc” Edgerton, for example. Doc was born at the turn of the twentieth century. He was a slight and elfin man by the time I met him in the late 1980s; lively and bright-eyed, his face was punctuated by a mischievous grin. I was accompanying my wife, Susan, to deliver a series of portraits she had taken of Doc in situ, surrounded by esoteric equipment in his lab—much of it designed and built by Doc. It was all part of Edgerton’s “Strobe Alley” at MIT.

Doc had been charmed by Susan during their portrait session, and I quickly faded into the background. He stuck out his hand; when she reached toward him, he quickly moved his hand from side to side, up and down, like a darting hummingbird, before he laughingly grasped her hand in return. He took her by the elbow to show her a series of sine waves on an oscilloscope. “Do you know what this means?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” she replied.

He fairly cackled. “Thank goodness. Neither do we!”

We spent much of the afternoon in his company. Doc was a legend. He was in the business of perfecting the art of seeing beyond what could be detected by the unaided eye. To the French, he was “Papa Flash,” forever endeared to them because he collaborated with the great undersea explorer Jacques Cousteau and because he had invented underwater photographic tools that enabled Cousteau and the crew of the famed ship Calypso to bring the wonders and unearthly beauty of the deep to a mass
audience. To staff and leaders in the U.S. Department of Defense, he was the genius whose inventions allowed them to see the shape of an atomic explosion in the first microseconds after detonation. To curators at the Museum of Modern Art, he was the creator of arresting images worthy of inclusion in their collection.

Doc taught me the limits of my own unaided vision. That’s another leadership lesson. What I saw in front of me, on the surface, might be only a tiny fraction of what could be seen if I tried hard enough. The person I saw in front of me might be only a tiny fraction of the person I could see if I tried hard enough. Vision could be extended and enriched if I used the tools at my disposal. If there were no tools, then perhaps new tools could be invented.

In 1991, I again found myself alone with transformative people. Ron Bornstein’s seventeenth-floor office had a commanding view of the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s sprawling and vibrant campus. The dome of the Wisconsin State Capitol loomed in the near distance, a reminder of the political and financial and operational issues far beyond my limited grasp. He placed the phone back in its cradle and joined me at the window. With the unguarded sincerity of the inexperienced, I asked, “Ron, how do you stand the pressure?”

He smiled. “Bill, if you think you want to fill that leather chair behind that big desk over there, you have to come to terms with a crucial fact. Look out this window.” He paused. “Look hard enough out to the horizon, and maybe you can see Oshkosh and Superior, way out west to River Falls or due north to Green Bay, and all the other great places we call the System. Think about it. I really mean it when I say ‘great.’ This is a great system. Two-billion bucks to run it every year. A hundred and fifty thousand students. Twenty-seven thousand faculty and staff. And you know what? Listen, now, this is the important part… even as I look out this window and close my eyes and see with absolute clarity in my mind’s eye the phenomenal things we’re doing every day, I know in my heart that at this very moment, even as I stand here and talk to you, somebody . . . somewhere . . . is screwing up! And it’s gonna end up on my desk.” He smiled and pointed across the room. “If you can’t stand the thought of that, Mr. Hogue, you don’t want to be in that chair behind that desk.”

I’ve never forgotten that moment, that pivot point when my sense of reality was disrupted and what I had previously considered to be normal no longer seemed to be so. Aha! Ron was another of those transformative people with a lesson to teach me. No matter whether they do so accidentally or intentionally, as a sin of omission or commission, humans screw up. And somebody has to clean up the mess.

At that moment, as if on cue, a door I hadn’t noticed opened in a wood-paneled wall. In stepped Katharine Lyall, an accomplished scholar and economist and president of the UW System. She smiled and immediately walked toward me, her hand extended in greeting. She was easily a foot shorter than I. She looked up at me and grasped my hand with both of hers. “Bill Hogue. We need you.”

I was stunned. Without any time to filter a response, my inner voice said I’m yours. But I’m afraid I must have gone mute again, just as I had with Steve Jobs, because she turned to Ron and asked whether he’d already scared me off. Still, she said it with a smile, and I recovered in time to say that I’d be honored to help.

There’s a coda to the story. My six-month commitment turned into eighteen months. I was spending alternate weeks in Madison and at my home campus in Eau Claire, 180 miles away, where I was the full-time CIO. The arrangement was a challenge for my campus and my colleagues, and it was hard on my children, on my wife, and on me. But when the UW System job was done and my successor chosen, I received an invitation from President Lyall. Dinner at her house. Could I possibly make it, and would I be kind enough to include Susan?

The evening came. I’m not sure exactly what we expected, but we figured it couldn’t be worse than our experience with Turkle, Papert, and Jobs in that Boston brownstone. What we didn’t expect was this. Katharine Lyall greeted us at the door and guided us to her kitchen. The president of the UW System prepared and served the meal, with Ron Bornstein joining us. Over dessert and coffee, Lyall kicked off her shoes and padded around in stocking feet: she was that unassuming and that comfortable in her own skin. As we departed with a modest gift as a remembrance, she also gave us a larger lesson to remember. At the door, Lyall held Susan’s hand, looked her in the eye, and thanked her for the family’s collective sacrifice. Lyall then thanked me for
answering the call of duty. I understood then that Katharine Lyall was another of the transformative people in my life.

Jump to 1996. There was no mistaking him as he walked toward me along what is called, at MIT, the Infinite Corridor. With an abstracted air, lionine hair, thick glasses, a beard of biblical proportions, and an open, welcoming face, radiating curiosity, this was Joel Moses, no question.

Moses is known for leading the development of the Macsyma system for algebraic formula manipulation and for co-developing the Knowledge-Based Systems concept in artificial intelligence. According to folklore among MIT undergraduates, Moses recited perfect artificial intelligence code for complex systems entirely from memory. He had served as head of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science and as dean of the School of Engineering. At the time of this encounter, Moses was MIT’s provost.

He stopped about ten feet in front of me, cocked his head to the side, knit his ample brow, and narrowed his eyes. He was trying to place me.

I helped him out: “Bill Hogue, Project Athena.”

“Yes, of course, I remember you, Bill. What have you been up to? I haven’t seen you lately.”

“I’ve been away for eight years, Joel. I’m just now back.”

“Gone?”

“Gone.”

“For eight years?”

“Yes, eight years.”

“Eight years.” He gazed off at something or nothing in the distance and was silent for a moment before offering his verdict. “Remarkable.” He smiled. “But you’re back now.”

“Yes, just back.”

“Ah, well,” he said. “That’s good, very good.” He smiled again and turned away. “Eight years,” he marveled to no one in particular. “Remarkable,” he con-
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“urgent” need, the definition of urgent is not necessarily shared by those who now must satisfy that need.

In his marvelous poem “Anterooms,” Richard Wilbur writes:

Time so often hastens by,
Time so often stops—

Still, it strains belief
How an instant can dilate,
Or long years be brief.”

Wilbur perfectly describes my encounter with Joel Moses. Both the poet and the scientist remind me of another close encounter, this time with a friend from the Hmong community in Wisconsin. My friend lived in a three-generation household: mother and mother-in-law; husband and wife; children. The household struggled to find a shared notion of time. For the children, raised in America, the passage of time was measured by a wristwatch. For the husband and wife, born in Laos but trying now to assimilate, the passage of time was tracked in the head. For the grandmothers, who had lived to old age in Laos and would never assimilate in America, time was felt in the heart. Thus was the poet’s observation exemplified: time as a continuum from discrete measurement to relativity—wrist, head, heart.

Before my close encounters, I thought I understood the passage of time, that I had the answers. I was wrong. The writer James Baldwin is credited with saying that the purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers. Think about that. Isn’t this also the purpose of higher education? We focus on three things in the academy: knowledge dissemination, and knowledge creation. That last piece—knowledge creation—demands that we use our five senses to go beyond what we think we already know. We are challenged to seek what previously the eye could not see, the ear hear, tongue taste, nose scent, or skin touch. That’s laying bare the questions.

Laying bare the questions might be a frightening and lonely pursuit without the presence of transformative people. At their best, transformative people teach us new ways to develop our senses. Through what they create and how they behave, they guide us toward valuable leadership lessons. When we’re at our best, we’re paying attention.

My career is now measured in decades. The number of transformative people who have helped me lay bare the questions and discover and apply leadership lessons is beyond my accurate accounting. They’ve helped me understand that

- fear controls;
- the unaided eye does not always see;
- screwing up is simply human;
- we need to be needed;
- “thank you” is one of the world’s most powerful and enduring statements; and
- time is discrete, time is relative.

My bet is that you’ve had a close encounter today, this week, or this year. Did you notice? Have your five senses been pulled into a new dimension? Do you feel disoriented, disturbed, dislocated? Has your reality, your sense of normal, been disrupted? If so, congratulations, and welcome to your new reality. Don’t forget to say “thank you.”

Notes
4. I don’t claim perfect recall of events or of specific details of conversations in the distant past. These impressionistic sketches are an attempt at faithful reconstruction of memories and reflections.
8. Today Moses is one of only eleven active faculty at MIT’s highest rank, Institute Professor. *Joel Moses,* MIT Engineering Systems Division, http://esd.mit.edu/Faculty_Pages/moses/moses.htm.
10. The Hmong in Laos were targeted for genocide after the United States withdrew from Vietnam and the Vietnamese Army took over the Laotian government in the mid-1970s. Thousands escaped death by immigrating to the United States, including Minnesota and Wisconsin, with the aid of charitable and religious service organizations.

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