Lead Yourself First!

Indispensable Lessons in Business and in Life

Michelle Ray

CHANGE MAKERS BOOKS

Winchester, UK
Washington, USA
Contents

Foreword .................................................. 1

Acknowledgments ........................................ 3

Introduction
   In Memory of Stan ..................................... 5

1 Why Should We Sip from a Teacup When We Can
   Drink from a River?
   Dream Big, Don’t Settle .............................. 9

2 Who Turned Out the Lights?
   Dedicated Slaves ...................................... 17

3 Cold-Calling Cat Woman
   Eliminating the Negative Thoughts that Live Rent Free . . 25

4 FYI
   A Post-It Note Can Change Your Life. ................ 33

5 Road Worrier
   The Glamour of Self-Employment.................... 43

6 Money Doesn’t Talk, It Swears
   How Money Hungry Are You? ....................... 51

7 Dusting Off Disappointment
   Staying Positive When the Letdowns Pile Up ........ 61

8 Let Me Take You to Disneyland
   Imagination in Business .............................. 69

9 Flexing Your Resiliency Muscle
   Sink or Survive ............................. 77
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*References* ................................. 183

*About the Author* ......................... 186

*Tell Me Your Story* ....................... 188
We have little to say when we begin life’s runway, and little to say when we end our runway, but we do have control on the runway. Michelle Ray’s new book, Lead Yourself First! Breakthrough Strategies to Live the Life You Want is bang on the money. Buy it, read it, and learn from it.

—DR. PETER LEGGE, OBC, CPae, CSP, HoF Speaker/Author/Businessman

Michelle Ray offers realistic ways to overcome common workplace challenges. Her life-changing parables are a must-read for growing your career in today’s economy.

—JEFF MOWATT, bestselling author of Influence with Ease

If you are ready to master your own destiny and turn self doubt into self mastery; Michelle’s magic way of telling real-life stories with life lessons should immediately jolt you out of any situation where you feel stuck. Don’t miss this read if you are ready to make a change.

—ELAINE ALLISON, CSP, bestselling author of The Velvet Hammer, PowHERful Leadership Lessons for Women Who Don’t Golf

Michelle Ray is an authority on inspiring one to truly get the life they want. Clear, inspiring, and easy to read. This is the kind of book that takes a hold of your insides so that you do not give up on yourself. You will find you’ll keep this book over your many years. Why? Because it works.

—VALERIE CADE, CSP, workplace bullying expert and author of Bully Free at Work

Pragmatic, down-to-earth, simple, and effective techniques. Everyone can get great ideas; quick and easy to use. If you want to make dramatic changes in your life this book provides you with the essential tools.

—RON COLEMAN, author of Building Your Legacy: Lessons of Success from the Contracting Community
Michelle Ray speaks to you at a gut level. She gets right to the point and finds your blind spots. You will love how she writes and be inspired by how she motivates. I hope you enjoy reading Lead Yourself First as much as I have.

—LINDA EDGECOMBE, CSP, HoF, author of Shift or Get Off the Pot! Simple Truths About Getting a Life

A call to arms for anyone pursuing a life of freedom. Take Michelle’s advice. Get out! You weren’t born to live in a box. You need to break free!

—WARREN MACDONALD, adventurer, speaker, and bestselling author of A Test of Will

Lead yourself straight to this book! Michelle Ray has created a leadership book with a difference. It is filled with inspirational stories, humor, and thought-provoking lessons. She tells us tales of ordinary folk who are reminder that each of us can be extraordinary. Read it and be inspired to make change!

—PAMELA CHATRY, Executive Managing Director, eWomen Network Vancouver Metro and Coquitlam

Michelle helps us pull ourselves up out of mediocrity and demand more for our lives. A great message!

—JANE ATKINSON, author of The Wealthy Speaker and The Wealthy Speaker 2.0

We all have “moments of truth in our lives” and those moments of truth have the power to change our lives forever. In those moments of truth we choose, consciously or unconsciously, to be a victim, survivor, or a thriver. If you want to be a thriver, this book is a must-read.

—DR. BRAD MCRAE, CSP, Director, The Atlantic Leadership Development Institute
Michelle Ray’s* Lead Yourself First* shares thought-provoking stories and practical advice that make you want to jump out of your rut and into a rich, expansive life worth living! And I say, why merely survive when you can truly thrive—financially, professionally, and emotionally? It sure energized me.

—MICHELLE CEDERBERG, speaker, coach, and author of *Energy Now! Small Steps to an Energetic Life*

In my work as a professional speaker, I meet many colleagues who talk a good game but Michelle Ray has been on the real “field.” *Lead Yourself First* is an honest, no-hype guide to real life that may be a bitter pill to swallow as you reflect on your current reality, but like good medicine, worth the effort. If you want to change your “view,” read this book!

—ALVIN LAW, motivational speaker and author of *Alvin’s Laws of Life*

Michelle Ray’s book, *Lead Yourself First* is a great read. It reminds me of the push I sometimes need to step outside of my comfort zone and follow the path I want, not just the path I think I should be traveling. Many of her stories give me that “aha” moment and her humorous take on the good and the bad make me smile as I’m reading.

—STEPHEN HAMMOND, speaker, consultant, and bestselling author of *Managing Human Rights at Work: 101 Practical Tips to Prevent Human Rights Disasters*

If you’re looking for inspiration and practical strategies to stay positive during these challenging times, *Lead Yourself First! Breakthrough Strategies to Live the Life You Want* is the book for you. In this accessible, and easy-to-read book, Michelle shares relatable personal stories to illustrate the power of personal leadership. She shows readers how to develop a “can-do” mindset to accelerate personal and professional success.

—ERICA PINSKY, author of *Road to Respect: Path to Profit (How to Become an Employer of Choice by Building a Respectful Workplace Culture)*
Thomas Paine wisely told us that “Character is much easier kept than recovered.” Author Michelle Ray reminds us . . . “Character first, Title second.” Personal leadership is a highly personal choice. Michelle Ray leads us to expand our possibilities in all things by making that choice every moment of each day.

—KARYN RUTH WHITE, motivational comedian, author, entrepreneur

Michelle has written the perfect book for these uncertain times. For anyone who is tired of being at the mercy of their environment and is ready to take charge of their success and their life this is a must-read. Michelle’s expertise and experience shines through as she shares how to break free and become the leader of your own life.


Powerful doses of practicality, seasoned with dollops of humor and touches of whimsy, Michelle Ray draws upon her years of first-hand experience to provide a realistic and no-nonsense primer on how to break free of the mental and emotional handcuffs that stop you from accomplishing what you truly want to achieve. Use her simply laid-out strategies to switch on, step up, and stand out.

—MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI, MBA, CGA, CSP leadership and workplace communication expert and author of Why Does the Lobster Cast Off Its Shell?
Introduction

In Memory of Stan

In November 2003, I was on my way home from a five-day business trip, passing through three time changes as I flew west to Vancouver. It was 5:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. I was tired and certainly in no mood to practice personal leadership. I was at Regina Airport, joining the other passengers heading zombielike into the metal detector. As we begrudgingly obeyed the robotic commands to remove electronic equipment from carry-on bags, I noticed the people ahead of me laughing uncontrollably. The hysterics clearly weren’t normal. The closer I got to the front of the line, the louder the giggles became. That’s when I noticed Stan the Security Man. I watched as he single-handedly entertained every passenger as each one engaged in the well-rehearsed ritual of removing shoes and bags for scanning, followed by a personal screening that we would either pass or fail.

As I walked through the metal detector, the alarms sounded, the lights flashed . . . chaos broke loose. Stan was waiting for me to walk through, bemused by the fact that I had no idea why I had set the machine off. I was panicked, but he simply looked at me and smiled. Then, he placed his hands to his chest and cupped his “breasts” without saying a word. I looked at him, wondering what he could possibly be doing. Would I be strip-searched? Was some deep humiliation coming my way? Then it hit me. Underwire bra!! I didn’t know I had the power!
I immediately convulsed with laughter and my impatience and exhaustion vanished. I asked Stan if the machines were different in Regina, as my undergarments had not previously registered at any other Canadian airports.

We engaged in a lighthearted conversation as Stan examined the contents of my bags. I happened to be carrying a pink magic wand (doesn’t everybody?). Stan removed the wand and proceeded to ask: “Are you the fairy godmother?” More laughter. When I explained my line of work as a professional speaker, Stan became very excited and asked if I was like Anthony Robbins, to which I replied: “not exactly.” He requested my business card and said he would look me up.

By this point I had to hurry for my flight and thanked him for our conversation. As I began running for the gate, Stan called out: “You have a beautiful smile!” Without turning around, I yelled, “thank you!” Now bound for Vancouver, I did not expect to see or hear from Stan again.

I arrived home three to four hours later, walked into my office and turned on my computer. As my email began downloading from the entire week, I noticed the following message, at the very top of the list:

-----Original Message-----
From: Stan Lindley
Sent: Friday, November 7, 2003 10:52 PM
To: Michelle Ray
Subject: You

Michelle, I am the Security Guard who went through some of your “stuff” at the Regina Airport this evening. I really enjoyed your website. Very good! Inspiration is a desired item these days. I used to be in the RCMP and ended up in
Re/Max selling in Edmonton. I loved motivational tapes and listened to them all the time. Life was good then all hell broke loose, my son took his life, my marriage ended, and I lost my job as a Provincial Govt. Fraud Investigator. I am rebuilding my life but it is slow and laborious. I was on disability for almost 3 years, and had to take a Security Job to keep going. I am trying desperately to move on, but feel overwhelmed by my age some days. I came back to Saskatchewan because this is where I grew up and my mother is still here although in failing health.

She is 85 and has Alzheimer’s. I am now her caregiver, and life is hard.

You were a momentary bright light this evening, and just wanted you to know that I would give anything to know that I could climb up that ladder just one more time, and get the most out of life. Maybe I could catch one of your seminars should you ever come back to this area again.

Thank you for the smile, it was worth a fortune to me. I will keep going. . . . I just wanted you to know you made a difference this evening.

Yours truly,
Stan Lindley

A great deal of correspondence ensued between Stan and me. I asked Stan’s permission to tell his story and he generously agreed. Stan Lindley was the leader of himself. He exemplified the principles of “me” management in every facet of his life as he unselfishly went about his day-to-day responsibilities. During
the course of his work in Regina and subsequently Edmonton airport, Stan continued to have an impact on complete strangers until he was stricken with a rare form of cancer that took him at age 61.

He wrote to let me know that when he was told he had only three to four months to live, he knew he would be unable to continue working, although it was his wish to “continue to make a difference.” Stan personified the meaning of “leader” as he harnessed the ability to take charge of his thoughts, and consequently his actions, in any situation. Character first. Title second. This was Stan the Security Man.

How often do we take stock and consider the impact of one person on the totality of how we choose to be in the world? Unfortunately, all too often when we have special encounters like this, we fail to see or appreciate the example. Therein lies the premise of this book: Lead yourself first, because no one else will.
Who Turned Out the Lights?

*Dedicated Slaves*

Soon after graduating from University, I was between advertising jobs and working part-time at the front desk of In-Shape Gym. I had moved back in with my parents because I could no longer afford to pay rent. I definitely needed to search for new employment. One day I saw an ad in the job classifieds: *State Sales Manager for Australia’s Fastest Growing Advertising Company*. My fingers couldn’t get to the typewriter fast enough! The recession had taken a toll on the advertising industry and jobs like this were a rare find. I knew it would be a highly sought-after position and thought I should give it a shot.

I was working at the gym when the call came; I was asked if I was available for an interview the next day. I contained my excitement and remained calm while I checked my (empty) calendar to confirm a 2:00 p.m. appointment the next day. As soon as I hung up the phone, I began jumping up and down.
I called my parents and all my friends to tell them the great news. The idea of being a *manager* was so appealing to me.

As I walked down Pitt Street for the interview, I already visualized my beautiful large office, brand-new company car, and high-paying salary. I arrived outside the building and checked the address. I looked back up at the building and back down at the address; I was hoping there was a mistake. The four-story building that stood before me was grey and drab; frosted, barred windows, some cracked, had thick, abandoned cobwebs draped around the edges. This building looked as though it was about to be condemned.

The paint was peeling off the walls in the lobby and several of the fluorescent lights flickered as I made my way to the elevator. When the doors opened to the second floor, the hallway was almost pitch-black. The light fixture was broken and a lonely bulb swayed from the hanging wires. To my left, I saw glass doors and headed in that direction, unsure of whether I was on the right floor. The sales department receptionist greeted me with a half-heartedly half smile. “Hi luvvy. You here for the manager job? Take a seat. You’re next.” Her words said one thing, but this was a less-than-warm reception.

I sat down and almost went through the chair—the cushion was completely worn and hard as a rock. I took in the surroundings and noticed the carpets were ripped in several places. The windows were filthy and several were cracked. I could see huge piles of dust balls and dirt on the windowsills.

Although it was a large space, the office was devoid of activity with the exception of a young man in one corner office, talking on the phone. At the opposite end was another office. The door was closed. The remaining space was an open-plan area comprised of ten partitioned cubicles, each furnished with a desk, chair, and telephone. The cubicles were largely empty; this place was
a ghost town. Within a few minutes, the receptionist’s phone rang. “The big boss is ready to see you now.”

She escorted me down the hall where the boss, Conrad, appeared in the doorway and smiled broadly. He extended his hand and enthusiastically shook mine. The dilapidated surroundings I had noticed earlier became invisible; suddenly, all I could see was Conrad’s confident demeanor and 1,000-wattage smile. The interview lasted for over an hour and went brilliantly. We negotiated my package, which included a brand-new car—just as I had imagined! I was ecstatic. I started my job as the new State Sales Manager one week later.

Sound perfect? Well, a few glitches began to appear. First of all, the knives came out on Day One. I discovered that the previous manager I replaced had been demoted to make room for me. Apparently, it was impossible to fire her, even though she had run the department into the red and turnover was rampant under her leadership. She decided to stay on in a sales representative role and it was my job to keep her motivated. Any attempt on my part to talk to her was a waste of time. If I was lucky enough to hear her voice, she was monosyllabic and completely disinterested in my efforts to build a relationship. On top of that, I also discovered that the receptionist, whom I dubbed “Chatty Cathy,” could not be trusted and anything I told her immediately got back to my predecessor.

I finally understood what it meant to feel “lonely at the top.” I was determined to do whatever it took to make things work. I would not be deterred; after all, I was now a manager! I put in outrageously long hours in an effort to turn things around. I was not going to be the manager who failed at this job. I was going to be successful. I was going to please my boss no matter what. Besides, I had nothing else going on in life and work seemed to fill the void. I became so obsessed with
my work that there were no boundaries between my personal and professional life.

Three months passed and, although there was still no sign of the company car I had been promised, I became the dedicated slave.

The dingy, dark office space that I had forgotten about during my interview suddenly came back into view. Night after night I stayed at work alone. Sadly, the mice and cockroaches that scurried around as soon as I entered the kitchen to get my dinner out of the refrigerator made me feel less alone. But I was determined to take on the challenge of my demanding new job, doing so at my own expense. Pleasing my boss mattered more than my own sanity.

One particular evening while I was still in my office, I called my friend Grace, a fellow workaholic. She was also in her office in another part of downtown where she worked as an attorney. I complained to Grace about my plight; telling her that the company had reneged on my car deal while I slaved away day after day and night after night. We delighted in sharing our work horror stories, completely oblivious of the harm we were causing ourselves by slaving away for fourteen hours a day.

As we talked and I was completely lost in conversation, the lights on my floor suddenly clicked off. It was completely dark outside my office. I heard the elevator doors open. I was terrified and screamed “Who turned out the lights?!?” There was no response. I heard heavy footsteps coming toward my office. I imagined a large shadowy figure grabbing me, stealing me off into the night. My hands were shaking, my heart was pounding. Grace was still on the phone with me, trying to keep me calm. Keys rustled as someone opened the glass doors. The lights came back on and my heart was now in my throat. This was it, the end of the road, I was sure of it.
Then someone called out my name. I felt a wave of relief as I recognized the voice. It was our janitor. He had been in earlier and forgotten some of the equipment he needed to take to the floor below.

Grace was happy to hear that all was well. But the truth was, all was not well. I was not well. It was now 9:30 p.m. and it dawned on me for the first time that perhaps I should go home.

That incident, of being scared out of my wits by the janitor late at night, was the first lesson that something in my life needed to change.

The next lesson happened soon after. Although I had very few outside interests, I did occasionally indulge in a massage. One evening I arrived for an hour-long appointment. One minute I was sitting in the waiting room, the next I was lying on the floor looking up at several faces staring down at me with concern. I had passed out from sheer exhaustion.

This time the alarm bells were ringing loudly enough for me to take action; this job was now affecting my physical health. I decided I was going to quit that month—even though I had finally received my car. My manager knew that I was extremely frustrated and disappointed by the numerous false promises and kept telling me that the situation was out of his hands. Our company was part of an international conglomerate and there were many chiefs above him.

As a dedicated slave, I put up with the false promises, convincing myself each week that things would change. When I handed in my resignation, my manager and the CEO requested an exit interview. I distinctly remember the CEO saying: “Now she’s leaving—we should never have given her that car!” To him the car was a reward with no reciprocity, even though I had slaved away for them. He couldn’t recognize that they had reneged on the deal for months before I ever got the car!
How do you extricate yourself from an unhealthy work situation? Is it more difficult to do when you relish the challenge? Can you tell the difference between being a workaholic and a hard worker? If you are an employer, are you treating your best people with respect, or are you punishing good performance?

Workaholism—A Sanctioned Addiction

Understanding work habits today has become even more complex due to the downturn in the economy. Many people are working harder because of financial necessity. However, obligation should not be confused with compulsion or addiction. Research indicates that Canadians and Americans are working longer hours and taking less vacation time than we did twenty years ago. Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey on time use found that just over a third of Canadians consider themselves workaholics. Americans, who are renowned as one of the hardest working and most productive people of the industrialized world, are also reducing their vacation days and working longer hours. In my experience, my work dependency was as harmful as an alcoholic or drug dependency because work took priority over everything else.

In addition, I became aware of the fact that I was avoiding the truth: work was filling a void and I didn’t know how else to fill it. It is difficult to know when you are crossing the line; there are times when work demands your attention and you may need to dedicate a significant amount of time to a project.

The most important thing is that you recognize whether this is an ongoing pattern where you are neglecting yourself and your family, or whether it a period of time in your life where the short-term sacrifice has an end-date. Only you can answer the question and even so, you may still not be ready to accept the answer.
I remember hearing an alcoholic describing his reaction to being pulled over by the police one night. As he was told to produce his license, his first thought was “Boy, I just have to stop driving!” I could identify with his story because I was always able to find a way to justify my behavior at work. I desired approval from my manager more than I desired spending time with friends and family. I recognized that something was wrong with this picture.

As a society, we respect hard work and sacrifice as hallmarks of success. At the opposite end of the spectrum is laziness. Many people feel the pressure of being at the lower end of the continuum for fear of being judged. Or, perhaps there is a sense of having something to prove. However, when work takes over your life, medical evidence strongly suggests that you are at far greater risk of coronary and stress-related illness.

**Establishing Boundaries**

If you do identify with the behavior of a workaholic, a “lights going out” moment can transform the way you approach your career or your business. You may need several of such “moments” before the penny drops. The best approach is to establish boundaries that are not punitive.

For example, if you know that it would be better to leave work...
at 7:00 p.m. instead of 8:00 p.m., it may mean breaking the cycle slowly by scheduling an activity for yourself that requires you to leave. Otherwise, leaving “early” may seem overwhelming. Taking incremental steps to improve work habits can prove more effective than expecting drastic change in a hurry. Professional guidance or support groups such as workaholics anonymous are another option.

**Rewarding Hard Work with More Work**

Many leaders inadvertently encourage hard workers to work even more demanding schedules by rewarding their efforts with more work. This badge of honor is worn proudly, although there may be a number of unintended consequences, such as driving a workaholic to do more damage to themselves; unable to break the vicious cycle.

Celebrating high levels of productivity is one thing . . . over-loading an employee with more tasks is another. By consistently recognizing the individuals who “contribute more,” an employer may inadvertently create a tension in the workplace where other employees now perceive themselves as “not being good enough.” This is an unhealthy cycle for any organization.

When you have a “lights going out” moment, perhaps it’s time to take stock in whether you are working toward an end-date or simply working and working and working. Are you a dedicated slave or are you finding true fulfillment in your career and in your life? It is important to remember that healthy people are in healthy situations. Finding balance between work life and personal life is the key to anyone’s success and well-being.
About the Author

Born in Australia, Michelle Ray is the Founder and CEO of the Lead Yourself First Institute. Michelle is a leadership and workplace relationship expert who demonstrates a deep understanding of personal accountability, internal team dynamics, interpersonal communication, and service excellence. She uses an interactive approach to inspire and captivate the imagination of her audiences.

Michelle began her career in the media industry during the recession of the early 1980s. She was once told by management that she “didn’t have what it takes” to succeed in the business
world. Despite a lack of mentors, Michelle was inspired to move up the management ladder to self-employment, eventually creating her own successful international business.

Michelle’s first training, speaking and consulting company was established in 1995. She subsequently created the *Lead Yourself First Institute* to help individuals and organizations take the initiative in the face of change and economic uncertainty. Her company’s array of educational training and keynote topics specialize in areas she describes as high demand essentials for professional growth. Michelle also offers in-house business seminars and consulting for leadership development, understanding changing demographics, communication and improving workplace relationships.

Michelle is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP), the highest-earned designation in the speaking industry. Less than 600 people worldwide have earned this distinction after meeting rigorous criteria established by the National Speakers’ Association. She has been listed in the Who’s Who of Professional Speakers and has worked with a myriad of clientele providing in house seminars and conference presentations. Her style has been described as refreshing, uplifting, entertaining, informative and amusing with a common sense message.

From thousands of entries received, Michelle reached the “Top Ten” of North America’s Next Greatest Speaker Contest in 2012. She currently resides in Vancouver, British Columbia with her husband Brian, is an avid runner, and enjoys spending time with her two adorable grandchildren.