It was a rainy, gloomy day when I left home for my first meeting with Tony.

Frankly, I was somewhat cynical about whether meeting with Tony would really change things at work. At best, time with Tony would probably make me feel better about how things were going. I guess I really doubted he could do much to change how I managed. After all, I had worked for years for one of the best companies in the world and had been to numerous management development sessions. To no one’s surprise, the impact of these highly-touted training sessions never lasted more than a short time.

I had to keep reminding myself — if things were great, I would have never called Tony in the first place. The truth was this: I was at a crossroads in my career. Deep down I knew that something was going to have to change, one way or another. “Get with it,” I chided myself. “Executives all over the country ask for Tony’s counsel. You should consider yourself fortunate he has time to talk with you.”

We had agreed to meet at 8:30. Because of the rain, I drove into Tony’s driveway at 8:40. Tony was waiting for me at the door, looking like he just stepped out of Gentlemen’s Quarterly.

“Hello, Jeff. Welcome!” he said, extending his hand and pulling me
toward him for a fatherly hug. “I am honored that you would take
your time to come and see me.”

Tony asked me to come in and gave me a quick tour. His home was
incredible. It was large but had a warm feel to it. After the tour, he
took me to his library where he said we would be meeting for the
next eight weeks.

There must have been over a thousand books on his library shelves.
I noticed several pictures of Tony standing with well-known business
leaders I immediately recognized. Some of the pictures were taken
in the library where I was sitting. I must admit I was a little intimi-
dated.

After several minutes of catching up, he said it was time to get down
to business.

“Your time is valuable, Jeff,” he began. “I think we need to set some
ground rules for us to follow if we’re going to make the best use of
our meetings; so I took the liberty of drawing these up while I was
thinking about our sessions. See what you think.”

He pushed a handwritten note across the table to me that listed three
simple rules:
“Simple enough,” I thought. “I can live with those rules.” Then I looked back at Tony. “I can handle these. Let’s get going.”

“Okay then,” Tony said. “Tell me what brings you here after all this time.”

For the next hour, I did the talking and Tony listened without saying much.

I began at my college graduation, the last time we had spoken to each other. I had been so excited about the future; I felt there was nothing that would keep me from being successful. I was educated, energetic and full of optimism.

For the first few years of my career, success came easily and promotions were rapid. I worked in sales for one of the most respected technology manufacturing companies in the world.
Then I was promoted into management — my first big break — and I loved it. Business was good. I went on great trips. I was involved in making some big decisions, and I learned a lot, early on. My team was not top performing, but our results were acceptable, even more than acceptable.

Some of the people on my team didn’t have the drive that I had, but business was so good that I didn’t worry about them. Actually, I probably ignored some performance issues that contributed to the problems I had now.

Oh, and I tried really hard to be “one of the guys.” I wanted my team to like me so they would want to work for me. So I frequently took them out for dinner and drinks — even shared some of the issues I was facing. At the time, it seemed like a good strategy.

About that same time, I believed the job upper management was doing was far from acceptable. In fact, I even told my team that if we did our jobs like upper management did theirs, our company would go under. We all laughed about that.

Those were the good times. But over the next several years, business began getting tougher. Most of my team was still intact, but some of the performance issues I once ignored were now affecting my division’s performance in a big way — and by “big,” I mean they were becoming threats to my job.

I was working hard — long hours — but the business indicators were telling me things were pretty bad. I wasn’t very happy and the people on my team weren’t happy. Our results reflected our frustrations.
I looked you up, Tony, so I could learn from you,” I said dejectedly. “I’m at my wits’ end, and I hope it’s not too late for me to turn this ship around.”

He had listened for almost an hour when Tony finally started talking.

“First,” he said, “I know you think these problems and the situation you described only exist on your team. You could not be more wrong. There are few — very few, if any — leaders who have not been faced with the same issues you’ve just shared. I know I have.

“When it comes to leading people, there is no problem that is unique to you. You could ask anyone with experience, and you would discover they have had to face the same issues, the same frustrations. So don’t feel sorry for yourself. That’s a waste of valuable time. Just make plans to make things better.

“Second, it’s not too late to change,” Tony continued. “You’re still a young person even though you have a wealth of experience. I admire you for calling me and seeking advice. Few people have the courage to take that step.

“Obviously, you’re facing some real challenges. Seeking an outsider’s advice is a good move. We all need people who will help us look at situations from a different perspective,” Tony said, his tone riveting my attention to every word. “In fact I have several people who are my mentors — people who have helped me gain new insights — and who have remained my mentors after all these years. It’s not too late to change, but you will have to work to make improvements.

“Remember: You’re not alone here. Most people have difficulty
making the transition from employee to manager and from manager to leader. Your dad once told me something that I will never forget. He said that if you want to be extraordinary, the first thing you have to do is stop being ordinary. Wanting to be liked and ‘just one of the guys’ is natural. Of course, everyone likes to be liked. But as a leader, your team should like, or respect, you for the right reasons.

“If they like you because you’re fair, consistent, empathetic, or a positive person — that’s great. But if they like you just because you provide them with free dinners and drinks, what have you gained? You’re setting yourself up for failure somewhere along the way. If your goal is to get everyone to like you, you will avoid making tough decisions because of your fear of upsetting your ‘friends.’

“Transitioning from employee to manager or manager to leader requires that you make different decisions. And believe me, those transitions can sometimes create challenges in every other area of your life as well.

“I remember when you were a teenager, Jeff. You were so excited when you celebrated your 16th birthday and got your driver’s license. Remember? You had watched your mom and dad drive for years, and as soon as you were old enough, you went through the driver’s education course.

“Now, remember how confident you were? You knew that you would be the best driver ever. You even promised your dad with those very words,” Tony said with a wink.

“Of course I do,” I replied. “I also remember the second day after getting my license, I had an accident. Thankfully no one was hurt.”
“I remember that, too,” Tony nodded. “Most of your soccer team was in the car with you. But, what you don’t know is that a few days later, your dad and I discussed that the main reason for the accident was your failure to understand the difference in responsibilities between being the driver and being a passenger.

“You see, passengers are free to do a lot of things the driver can’t do. As a driver, your focus needs to be on the road and not on the distractions. As a driver, you no longer have the right to ‘mess around’ — like listening to loud music — even though it seems okay to do that as a passenger.

“The same principle applies when you become a leader. You’re no longer a passenger; you become the driver. Even though your responsibilities increase when you become a manager, you lose some of the rights or freedoms you may have enjoyed in the past.

“For instance,” Tony continued, “if you want to be successful as a leader, you don’t have the right to join employee ‘pity parties’ and talk about upper management. You lose the right to blame others for a problem in your department when you are a manager and leader. You are the person responsible for everything that happens in your department, and that can be pretty hard to swallow.”

But he wasn’t through. “You even lose the right to some of your time because you’re responsible for other people’s time as well as your own,” he said, stopping to check his watch. “Speaking of time, what time did you arrive today?”

“A little after 8:30,” I said innocently.
“And what time did we agree to begin?” Tony wondered aloud.

“Eight-thirty. But it was raining, and traffic was heavy, and I thought I left in plenty of time,” I stumbled.

“Yes, it was raining,” he easily agreed. “But the rain didn’t make you late. You see, Jeff, when you accept total responsibility for whatever happens, you make adjustments. When it’s raining, you leave earlier, or take a different route, or call and change the meeting time. You control if you are on time or not. The rain just forces you to make different decisions.

“The opposite of accepting responsibility is to find someone or something to blame for the issues you’re facing. Of course, there is always someone or something to blame, but a real leader spends his time fixing the problem instead of finding who to blame.

“What happens when you place blame is that you focus on the past. When you accept responsibility, you focus on this time forward — on the future. And Jeff, until you accept total responsibility — no matter what — you won’t be able to put plans in place to accomplish your goals.

“One of the first things I want you to understand is that you have control over how you react to situations. If you eliminate blame — don’t even have the word in your vocabulary — then you can make some positive changes.”

Tony glanced at his watch again. “Well, I see we’re about out of time today…as we agreed.”
He handed me a blue spiral notebook with the words “Monday Mornings with Tony” handwritten across the cover. “Take this notebook and begin writing down what we discuss,” he said. “It will be easier for you to keep track of when you need to review our discussions.”

Tony stood and walked me to the door. “So is there anything you will do this week to make your situation better?”

“Well, what you said about taking responsibility makes sense, but there are so many external factors working on my team, I’m not so sure I can ‘belly up to the total responsibility bar,’” I said sheepishly.

“But what I can do, for sure, is not participate in the pity parties or blame upper management for our problems. And I will try to take responsibility for everything and see how it goes,” I promised.

“Write those things in the notebook when you get home,” Tony suggested. “And remember, when you write things down, you commit to doing them. If you simply tell me what you want to do, there is really no commitment to getting it done.”

I agreed and told him I would be there at 8:30 sharp next Monday.

I left Tony, feeling even more frustrated. It was going to be pretty hard to accept responsibility for everything that happened in my department, and I wasn’t sure it was realistic. Some of the things he had said made sense, but were his philosophies up to date, I wondered. But, I had promised. I would try something different and then wait to see what would happen.
Later that day, I opened the notebook to record the lessons I had learned. Inside the notebook was a letter from Tony that read:

Jeff,

Congratulations for having the courage to seek advice. This step alone indicates to me that you have a tremendous amount of pride in your work and, more importantly, that you are willing to take responsibility for your actions. As you turn this page, let the words you write in this notebook become a new blueprint for your success in your business and personal life.

I am honored that you are allowing me to share my experiences with you, and I look forward to seeing you again next Monday.

Best wishes,

Tony

As I read the note, I could feel the genuineness of his words. He sincerely wanted me to be successful. And I began to feel more confident than I had in years that change for the good was on the horizon.
BE A DRIVER:

✓ Until you accept total responsibility — no matter what — you will not be able to put plans in place to accomplish your goals.

✓ Transitioning from manager to leader requires that you make different decisions.