



The Accidental Leader

A White Paper Exploring the Leadership of Don
Schoendorfer, Founder and CEO of
Wheelchairmissions.org

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Leadership Challenge

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Executive Summary

In 2017, Free Wheelchair Mission delivered its one-millionth free wheelchair. Don Schoendorfer's vision of distributing free wheelchairs to the 70 million people in emerging nations had reached a significant milestone. Through engaging his vision of a wheelchair for everyone in need by exercising insight and oversight and by aligning others with the common values of dignity, innovation, excellence and collaboration, Don created a significant worldwide non-profit organization that is changing the lives of millions of people in third world nations. However, Don did not set out to start a ministry that would grow into a multi-million dollar non-profit company distributing millions of wheelchairs around the world using 27 distribution partners, numerous faith based organizations, 30+ employees and over 4,000 volunteers. Don started out to write a paper on the efficacy of effective wheelchairs in emerging nations. However, a series of events pushed Don into re-examining his life philosophy and calling causing Don to become an accidental leader.

The Story

True leaders inspire a shared vision and enlist others in executing it. However, sometimes it takes a while for a leader to recognize the vision. Don Schoendorfer's life was forever changed during a vacation in Morocco in 1977. During the visit, while dealing with panhandlers and beggars, Don literally stumbled over his life's work when he tripped over a disabled lady clawing herself across the street by her fingernails. What struck him was not the struggle the lady was having crossing the street, but the way she tried to avoid eye contact attempting not to be noticed. In her culture, someone who is disabled is lower in the cast system than a beggar or a panhandler. Don did not see a disability issue, he saw a dignity issue.

The image haunted Don for over twenty years surfacing every few days only to be pushed down by the daily trials of making a living, raising children, and building wealth. One day, after hearing a sermon concerning the wealthy man storing grain for the future but dying before he could enjoy it, Don decided to do something. The next day he got up and asked himself, "what did that woman really need that day?" The answer was simple, a wheelchair. It was the day Don found his voice and the first day of many in which Don woke up at 4 am in an effort to work on the solution. Originally, he planned to write a paper on "The Safety and Efficacy of a Durable, Functional Wheelchair for the Developing World."

At a cost of \$500-\$4000 each, a standard wheelchair is outside the reach of the world's impoverished. Living on just two dollars a day means most of the world's comfort and convenience are out of reach for those who live just trying to ensure food is on the table for themselves and their families. A bio-mechanical engineer by vocation, Don started exploring options such as creating his own seats and just buying the wheels.

At a cost of \$100 each the wheels were too expensive, and after exploring a number of options, he was no closer to a solution. He stumbled across the answer in a most unlikely place, Toys-R-Us. Walking through the store, he came across a small bike for \$40. By purchasing the bike for the wheels, he cut his cost by 75%. By purchasing the bike wheels from the factory, he saved even more.

His second revelation came during a visit to Lowe's. There he saw a durable white polymer chair that many of us have somewhere on the back porch or in the backyard. The chairs were comfortable and strong enough to handle the rough terrain they would most likely be used in. Bicycle wheels could be repaired almost anywhere in the world, since bicycles are the most common form of transportation on earth. By combining the chair and the bicycle wheels with a simple steel frame he designed, Don had a design that was viable. As he continued to research the idea he stockpiled over 100 chairs. At this point, his wife challenged him to do something with them, possibly with the desire of using their garage for a car once more. Don took the hint and turned to the challenge of distribution.

His church was coordinating a medical mission trip, and after numerous requests he was allowed to join a team going to India. Because he has no medical training he had to sign up as a laborer. Within days of his departure he faced his first challenge - it was going to cost \$125 to transport each chair. He was approved to take only four chairs on the trip. The first was given away within minutes of opening the clinic. Emmanuelle, an 11-year-old boy being carried into the clinic by his father, broke into a huge smile when Don presented him with his new set of wheels. Upon leaving the clinic his mother, through a translator said, "Bless you for this chariot."

The next day, Don followed one of the doctors on home visits in the local community. There he met Orchid Blossom, a 16-year-old girl who had never seen the world from any point of view other than a small mat located in the 8 x 10 room where she slept. After her examination, the doctor told Don that she would be an excellent candidate for one of his wheelchairs. The next day he delivered the wheelchair. For the first time in her life Orchid Blossom got to see the world independently from her new chair.

Don returned to California with renewed purpose thinking he was well on his way to completing his paper. However, soon after his return he lost his job. This created a challenge requiring him to rethink his life's purpose. People were asking him what he was going to do next and his standard response was, "Find a job." Friends encouraged him to continue making wheelchairs, and his response was that he needed to "Get rid of the 96 I have so my wife can park in the garage again." To his surprise, unsolicited funds started arriving and people continued to encourage him to establish a non-profit organization focused on supplying wheelchairs to those in need.

When asked what his biggest challenge was in developing his nonprofit organization he says, "I was my biggest challenge." He says it took two years for him to finally realize the scope of his

project and the impact it would have on people's lives. Finally, he started the process of starting a non-profit by purchasing the book "Non-Profits for Dummies" and following the instructions page by page to apply for his 501-C3. Looking back he says he would have achieved his one-millionth wheelchair much earlier had he simply stepped into leadership earlier.

"I was my biggest challenge."

Don Shoendorfer

As Don continued to explore how to distribute wheelchairs, he was required to take some calculated risks. He had learned of a warehouse in China that could create and pack a container of 500 wheelchairs at a significantly reduced cost. Without the funds to go and inspect the warehouse, Don took a risk and purchased his first container.

Within weeks, it arrived in southern California with all the wheelchairs intact. He used these chairs for a trip to Mexico and started ordering containers for distribution worldwide. He also began working with colleges around the world who would use their mechanical engineering interns to receive the container of wheelchairs and then put the chairs together preparing them for distribution. His organization currently coordinates volunteers to distribute the chairs to remote places in over 93 countries.

Later, they discovered that some of the wheelchairs would become unusable because of the lack of a pump or supplies to repair the wheels. Now, every wheelchair is shipped with a repair kit and a pump. Recently, the organization has also started training people who distribute the chairs to provide basic information concerning exercise and physical therapy to train the recipients of the wheelchair on how they can exercise and build their strength while using the wheelchair.

Six years after his first mission trip, Don would return to see Orchid Blossom with the goal of verifying the durability of the chair. When he knocked on their front door her mother answered and could barely contain her enthusiasm. The mother pushed Don back onto the porch and made him sit down. A few moments later, Orchid Blossom, a beautiful 21-year-old young lady, was pushed to the front door. When he stood to step forward to greet her she stopped him and indicated he should sit back down. Seconds later, Orchid Blossom pushed herself up from the seat and walked to him unassisted to give him a hug.

Don learned that after she familiarized herself with the chair, she started building her strength by transferring from the chair to the toilet and back. That little bit of exercise strengthened her legs to the point that later she was able to turn the chair around and use it as a walker. She was

determined even though her family became worried that she would hurt herself because of numerous falls. Orchid blossom was undaunted and continued to work towards independence. Now, this amazing 21-year-old young lady was fully ambulatory. Don's chair had changed her life forever, and she was one of thousands.

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Don's oversight and continued desire for quality has resulted in him making two major upgrades to the wheelchair design. He has created chairs that are adjustable, foldable and meet even the challenging requirements of the American Food and Drug Administration. In addition, kits are now compiled and distributed from China with the wheelchair components combined. These kits now include the chair as well as a repair kit and a hand pump t in an effort to extend the life of the chair in remote areas.

Don travels nationally in search of donors to support the effort whether he is requesting support from a fortune 500 company to purchase a full container or encouraging a school to work together to provide mobility for one person in need.

Since Don started building wheelchairs one at a time in his garage, his organization has grown exponentially. His values of honoring God, excellence, transparency and collaboration combined with his desire make a difference in the lives of people in desperate need have connected with thousands of donors and volunteers. His organization currently has 31 employees and over 4,000 active volunteers. His non-profit organization, Free Wheelchair Mission, works with donors, volunteers and distribution partners around the world to deliver wheelchairs to places far and wide.

Mission

Free Wheelchair Mission believes in a world where everyone who needs a wheelchair has one. Their goal is to provide their next million wheelchairs by 2025.

With an estimated 70 million people around the world today in need of a wheelchair without the means to get one, Free Wheelchair Mission endeavors to distribute over 100,000 wheelchairs annually and continues to pursue our goal to distribute our second million wheelchairs by the end of 2025.



Free Wheelchair Mission continues its focus and commitment on becoming a leading provider of mobility in developing nations. Beyond placing recipients in a wheelchair, Free Wheelchair Mission is bringing transformation that opens doors to education, employment opportunities, and community that these individuals only dreamed of before receiving the gift of mobility.

Values

- We honor God in all we do.
- We pursue excellence in all our work.
- We strive for efficiency to optimize resources.
- We commit to transparency in our relationships, operations, and finances.
- We encourage worldwide collaboration.
- We innovate to provide transformative mobility solution.

Data

- Organization Start Date: 1999
- 501(c)3 Status Obtained: 2001
- Number of Employees: 31 (Full and Part Time Employees)
- Number of Volunteers: 4,000+ part time volunteers and interns
- Number of Countries Served: 93
- Number of Distribution Partners: 27
- Number of Wheelchairs Distributed: 1,085,709 as of July 1, 2018
- Annual Donations in FY 2018: \$8,059,639
- Percentage to Customer: 75%
- Major Distribution Points: Vietnam, India, China, Peru, Philippines

Questions for Discussion

1. What leadership challenges did Don face as he began his work of designing, developing and distributing wheelchairs to emerging nations in need? What were his struggles and how did he overcome them?

2. Which of the five practices or ten commitments are explored in this story?

3. Discuss some of the Leadership behaviors from the Leadership Practice Inventory you observed as you read the story of Don leading this organization.

Answer Key

Discussion Question #1

Don reported that his biggest challenge was making the choice to lead in the first place. In *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner point out that “Leadership is a choice.” It took some time before Don made that choice. Don himself reported that he would have reached his goal of one-million wheelchairs much earlier if he had stepped into leadership earlier.

Don faced the standard challenges concerning the designing and delivery of a new, innovative product worldwide. People were resistant to his vision, and medical missionaries resisted him even joining their team the first time he took wheelchairs overseas. The design costs were prohibitive requiring him to use oversight to solve design and supply issues. His breakthrough coming from the least likely of places, Toys-R-Us and Lowes. However, his largest challenge may have been in answering the simple question, “Can I really make a difference?” This underlying question is THE question that often keeps people from ever taking the first step in creating a new product, improving a design, or making a difference in the world. It took the haunting memory of the woman clawing herself across the street over 20 years before Don answered his calling and took action.

Discussion Question #2

No person designs and delivers over a million free wheelchairs without engaging in each of the practices. Putting together a volunteer workforce requires a commitment to shared values and ideas. Having this commitment from over 4,000 volunteers requires a person to model the way in regards to having clearly identified values and goals. What is apparent, however, is Don’s openness to taking ideas from a number of sources. Don was open to the idea of bicycle wheels being used as wheel-chair wheels when the idea came to him in Toys-R-Us. Don continually took risks as he tried different ideas for wheels, seats and the frame that held it all together. In fact, once he finalized the design for his first generation of wheel-chairs, he began looking for ways to improve the design in regards to comfort and distribution. As his organization grew he celebrated the team’s accomplishments while continuing to look forward to the future. Now in his 12th year, Don expects to meet his next goal of an addition one million wheelchairs being delivered in half the time it took for the first million.

Discussion Question #3

Don is a leader who has discovered a mission that itself inspires shared values and allows people to be involved in activities that are ennobling by nature. The wheelchair itself represents a commitment to dignity and the value of each individual regardless of their station in life. However, this story does reveal many of the behaviors identified in the LPI.

These specific behaviors include:

LPI Behavior #4. Don develops cooperative relationships with faith based organizations in an effort to both give away wheelchairs and share the love of God in doing so.

LPI Behavior #12. As Don raises funds and speaks to faith based organizations and business people, he appeals to others to share an exciting dream of the future.

LPI Behavior #13. From the beginning, Don actively searched for innovative ways to build his chairs.

LPI Behavior #14. Don treats others with dignity and respect. In his mind the wheelchair itself represents his organizations value of dignity.

LPI Behavior #21. Don builds consensus around a common set of values for running his organization.

LPI Behavior #22. Don paints a big picture of what we aspire to accomplish. In his case, it is 2 million wheelchairs by 2025.

LPI Behavior #23. Don identifies measurable milestones which he uses to obtain the over-reaching goal of his organization. (See 22)

LPI Behavior #27. Don speaks with genuine conviction about the higher meaning and purpose of his work. You cannot talk to Don without quickly becoming aware of his passion and commitment to his mission. He is convinced his mission to provide dignity to the disenfranchised by giving them a simple chair which, in many places, literally removes them from the ground and elevates them to a position of being seen as human.

LPI Behavior #28. Don takes the initiative in anticipating and responding to change.

A Note from the Author

I have been watching Don Schoendorfer and his organization since 2007 when I first saw his story in the book *Everyday Greatness*. While not the standard leadership journey we often see individuals take, once Don leaned into his leadership role, great things happened for millions of people. Don is known as a servant leader by his staff, and despite his hesitancy to step into leadership, he currently stands at the helm of an organization that is changing the lives of millions. While Don may have been an “Accidental Leader” in the beginning, it does not mean he is any less effective now as he continues to distribute wheelchairs around the world giving dignity to the downtrodden and mobility to those in need. I am in awe of his accomplishments.

About the Author



Michael Curtis is a Certified Master in Training who lives in Lindale Texas. Michael leads a team of highly motivated trainers who provide basic skills training, communication and leadership training to The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services - a social service agency committed to protecting the most vulnerable of Texans (children and the elderly).

Michael has over 35 years of training and leadership experience including 35 years of marriage, 23 years of state service and 10 years of military service. In addition to his day job, Michael conducts marriage workshops, helps couples through marriage coaching and takes a few days here and there to Kayak and take pictures.