

Absolute Impact

the drive for personal leadership



Matthew May



Absolute Impact will challenge how you think about your work...and life!

In *Absolute Impact*, author Matthew May penetrates the deeper issues involved in achieving significant positive impact in work and life. Through an entertaining dramatic dialogue, four unique characters – each with a distinctly different perspective – debate the central challenges to personal leadership. Drawing on the wisdom of the ages and supported by the science of human nature, the fable's approach moves from concept to application, past explanation to demonstration. Complete with discovery exercises and evaluative tools, *Absolute Impact* unveils the timeless keys to accomplishing your life's greatest work!

Absolute Impact:

“...made me think about the legacy of leadership I want to leave...no one escapes the central question of this book, and everyone can use its guidance in pursuing the answer.”

– STEVE GOODALL, President/COO, J.D. Power and Associates

“...goes straight to the heart of what it means to be a leader, regardless of walk in life...by understanding our unique gifts and sharing them with the world, we can all be leaders.”

– AN DE VOOHT, EVP/CFO, Red Bull North America

“...reminds us that choices we make about work and career affect all areas of our lives and, in turn, that our work is deeply affected by our personal lives.”

– STEW FRIEDMAN, Practice Professor, The Wharton School, and
coauthor of *Work and Family – Allies or Enemies?*

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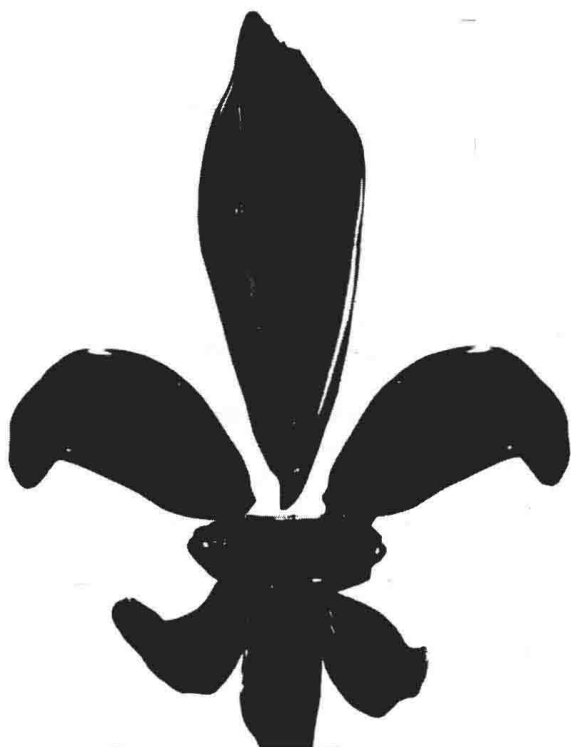
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Virtual Reality Impact

by

Absolute Impact

the drive for personal leadership



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Matthew May





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Praise for

Absolute Impact

the drive for personal leadership

*“Matthew May’s **Absolute Impact** provides a thought-provoking, introspective journey on leadership – and life itself. Through the parables and wisdom of a character taking his last breaths, May invites the reader to probe some of life’s most fundamental questions while they still have a chance to do something about answers that may unsettle them. May’s narrative style avoids the too-frequent, heavy-handed lecture trap, instead allowing readers to question themselves with personalized privacy and pace. For the willing reader, the excellent exercise tools can open the door to a better life and a better legacy. Done right, this is not a ‘quick read’ – but an important one.”*

Andrew R. McGill, Ph.D., Professor, University of Michigan Business School and coauthor of *The Ethical Challenge: How to Lead with Unyielding Integrity*

*“With succinct language and descriptive examples, Matthew May inspires us all, from student to veteran professional – guiding us in discovering our own path to personal excellence and demonstrating that we must leverage both our own and others’ gifts to achieve meaningful goals. **Absolute Impact** should be required reading for today’s young adults.”*

Daniel W. Funk, Vice President, Dole Food Company

“Certainly, the topic of personal leadership in this age of heavily scrutinized CEOs is an intriguing one, with May examining how to capitalize on talents and rein in ambition.”

– Booklist

*“May writes with an eloquence similar to the great classics of the English language. **Absolute Impact** is recommended reading for anyone wishing to lead a more satisfying, rewarding and productive life.”*

– ForeWordreviews.com

"This book goes straight to the heart of what it means to be a leader, regardless of walk in life. . .by understanding our unique gifts and sharing them with the world, we can all be leaders."

An De Vooght, EVP/CFO, Red Bull North America

"Absolute Impact reminds us that choices we make about work and career affect all areas of our lives and, in turn, that our work is deeply affected by our personal lives."

Stew Friedman, Ph.D., Practice Professor, The Wharton School, and coauthor of Work and Family – Allies or Enemies?

"Enjoyable. . .unique. . .it drew me in. . .I moved it up in the queue ahead of the nine other leadership books on my coffee table!"

Jane Beseda, Vice President, Toyota

"Absolute Impact made me think about the legacy of leadership I want to leave. . .no one escapes the central question of this book, and everyone can use its guidance in pursuing the answer."

Steve Goodall, President, J.D. Power and Associates

"Most leadership books are a collection of 'do this' or 'do that'—Absolute Impact presents a more self-driven, and thus far more powerful pathway to higher excellence and personal performance."

Ken La Spada, President, Sierra Pacific Constructors

"The model of leadership presented in this book is an elegant one, by virtue of its simplicity and universal relevance."

Rick Lueders, Regional General Manager, Hyundai

"Absolute Impact makes it clear that before we can lead others, we must first learn to lead ourselves – a timely message."

Tim Toomey, CEO, Southern California Graphics

"The journey to ourselves is one we all must take if we are to become true leaders. Absolute Impact gives us the tools for the trip!"

Rick Zundel, Vice President, Winthrop Financial

Dedication

To all the everyday heroes in my life.

To my father, who taught me at an early age that “*all things change, and we must change with them.*”

Rest high on that mountain.

The Penalty of Leadership

In every field of human endeavor, he that is first must perpetually live in the white light of publicity. ¶ Whether the leadership be vested in a man or in a manufactured product, emulation and envy are ever at work. ¶ In art, in literature, in music, in industry, the reward and the punishment are always the same. The reward is widespread recognition; the punishment, fierce denial and detraction. ¶ When a man's work becomes a standard for the whole world, it also becomes a target for the shafts of the envious few. ¶ If his work be merely mediocre, he will be left severely alone — if he achieves a masterpiece, it will set a million tongues a-wagging. ¶ Jealousy does not protrude its forked tongue at the artist who produces a commonplace painting. ¶ Whatsoever you write, or paint, or play, or sing, or build, no one will strive to surpass or to slander you unless your work be stamped with the seal of genius. ¶ Long, long after a great work or a good work has been done, those who are disappointed or envious continue to cry out that it cannot be done. ¶ Spiteful little voices in the domain of art were raised against our own Whistler as a mountebank, long after the big world had acclaimed him its greatest artistic genius. ¶ Multitudes flocked to Bayreuth to worship at the musical shrine of Wagner, while the little group of those whom he had dethroned and displaced argued angrily that he was no musician at all. ¶ The little world continued to protest that Fulton could never build a steamboat, while the big world flocked to the river banks to see his boat steam by. ¶ The leader is assailed because he is a leader, and the effort to equal him is merely added proof of that leadership. ¶ Failing to equal or to excel, the follower seeks to depreciate and to destroy — but only confirms once more the superiority of that which he strives to supplant. ¶ There is nothing new in this. ¶ It is as old as the world and as old as the human passions — envy, fear, greed, ambition, and the desire to surpass. ¶ And it all avails nothing. ¶ If the leader truly leads, he remains — the leader. ¶ Master-poet, master-painter, master-workman, each in his turn is assailed, and each holds his laurels through the ages. ¶ That which is good or great makes itself known, no matter how loud the clamor of denial.

That which deserves to live — lives.



In seeking a symbol to represent the spirit of ***Absolute Impact***, I chose the *fleur-de-lis*, the quintessential icon of the Renaissance, a time of European cultural rebirth experiencing the greatest growth in arts and sciences in the history of human endeavor. Commonly found in heraldic crests, it was one of the most highly regarded marks among those of nobility. The *fleur-de-lis* (French for “flower of light”) is derived from the lotus (a.k.a. lily or iris) flower. The three leaves are believed to symbolize faith, wisdom, and valor.

Preface

At some point in life, we will all reflect on a most important question regarding our life's work: *Have I made the most of what I have to offer the world?*

Whether one's work is parenting or presiding, the ability to lead oneself toward a positive answer to this deceptively simple question is of paramount importance, for it stands at the very heart of making a difference. An unequivocal "yes" is a true personal triumph; yet, it is a victory few ever truly realize. In fact, most people avoid confronting the question entirely until it is far too late in life to change their circumstances.

Consider this*:

- *Most people (71%) would rather be doing something else with their life*
- *Most people (73%) spend most of their day (6 out of 8 hours) distracted in their work*
- *Most people (77%) feel they don't / can't bring their true self to work*

Beyond prompting the questions of how and why so many so often end up on the wrong path in work and life, these results reveal a disturbing situation in which personal excellence is withheld from one's work. Reversal is of unquestionable importance, and anyone attempting such a compelling personal renaissance must face rather daunting questions about the role of work in life.

My intent in writing *Absolute Impact* is to raise these very issues, and in so doing talk about leadership in a new way – a much more personal way. I believe leadership must move beyond simple effectiveness and directing the performance of others to become more about making the most of our unique abilities to positively impact the lives of those with whom we are connected in work and life – ultimately leading ourselves to truly meaningful accomplishment. In my view, the ability to lead oneself in this manner is the defining prerequisite to leading others – it is indeed *personal* leadership.

This, in turn, requires an uncommon level of self-knowledge – insight rarely found except among highly impactful people (those we deem leaders). Yet, "success secrets" urging adoption of some amalgam of visible practices – techniques attributed to, or held in common by, noteworthy individuals – have yielded little in the way of standout, standup performance. Reasons? First, because these 'cookbook' approaches simply don't dive deep enough (it is the process that yields the original recipe that holds the key). Second, because most of what works for others is generally mismatched to our unique constellations.

Over the past two decades, I have studied high impact individuals using a much different approach. Viewing common denominators as a concept best left for mathematics, I searched for *variation* within the species itself, discerned patterns in a continuum of variation, delineated the dimensions of common

* (Based on a nationwide poll conducted by Aevitas Learning)

uniqueness, and devised a model thusly. My discovery: three distinct, self-driven factors (*not* techniques) that account for nearly all of the variance in personal impact, regardless of one's walk in life. These factors in tandem suggest a readily accessible and rather timeless pathway – one, it turns out, that is supported not only by one of the greatest thinkers of all time (Plato), but also by more contemporary thinking on human nature.

Absolute Impact thus posits a uniquely different route: a universal means by which we chart our own course through life in what amounts to a lifelong quest to discover, deepen, and direct that which truly drives us. The goal is not necessarily to embark on a radically new path in life, but to investigate how we might bring more of who we are to our current, everyday experience. You must be of two minds to embark on this exploration – one of curiosity, the other of challenge – as there are two lanes to travel: thought and action.

From this point forward, consider yourself a journeyman leader. But beware, traveler, for there is no map (that would miss the point). You must learn your way as you *make* your way. Like any epic odyssey, travel into unfamiliar and unknown territory is required. My role will be simply to help facilitate the process by moving you beyond concept to application, past explanation to demonstration. I have included a section at the end (*Artenza's Tools*) to further aid you in your efforts to lead yourself toward absolute impact. I apologize in advance for not offering pat answers. None exist.

My desire is to elevate and challenge your thinking. I aim to do so by offering you a unique and enjoyable read founded in research, science and philosophy, and using dramatic dialogue as the propelling literary device – complete with all the lyricism and symmetry I could muster. Instead of the typical single viewpoint offered by most books, there are four – each represented by a different character, each with a distinctly different worldview. My bet is that you will identify with at least one of them.

A final thought: now more than ever, we need excellent leadership at every level in our society – in our families, communities, institutions, and organizations. In a world where certainty and stability have yielded to a myriad of predominantly disruptive forces and a truly frightening speed of change, this need is one not easily met. However, some things must stand firm to both guide and inform us in times of great change. These are the absolutes. This is the territory of ***Absolute Impact***.

I hope – and indeed believe – you will find the experience of reading ***Absolute Impact*** both entertaining and enlightening.

Matthew May
Westlake Village, California
November 2002

Introduction

*Out of Plato come all things that are still written
and debated by men of great thought.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Plato had it right 2500 years ago.

Advancing the notion that there are few new ideas after Plato, I humbly defer to that most profound thinker of antiquity, from whose philosophies virtually all other study can arguably be derived. Even those notable thinkers taking issue with Plato find themselves defending and comparing their ideas to his.

Absolute Impact pays homage to Plato, who wrestled with the issues of personal excellence in leadership long before anyone else, and whose seminal ideas and high concepts are as relevant today as they were then. Anyone familiar with this classical master will recognize his dialectic methods reflected in the book. I have selected key ideas from Plato's major works that lend support to my approach, and included them throughout in the form of framing quotes.

A bit about Plato and his relevance to ***Absolute Impact***:

Plato (427 - 347 B.C.) *Greek philosopher*

Plato was consumed with the fundamental, philosophical problem of working out a theory for the art of living and knowing, and he felt that knowledge was a living, interactive force.

Plato saw his task as that of leading humanity to a vision of some sense of the highest good – of defining and pursuing the *good* life beyond merely the *successful* life. A good man was a just man, with justice defined as each person doing their work according to their nature. According to Plato, when we develop our talents and flourish, the results are a good life – for the individual and the society we live in. So to understand justice, one must understand goodness, which in turn demands the pursuit of truth.

Plato's method of philosophical inquiry, taught to him by his teacher, Socrates – whose wisdom we know of only through Plato's written dramatic dialogues in which Socrates figures centrally (Socrates never wrote anything) – consisted of challenging people and working them through a series of questions. This "Socratic method" – or *dialectic* – eventually gave rise to the idea that truth must be pursued through dialogue and query. Plato founded "The Academy" in 385 B.C. to formalize this pursuit. The Academy would become, in its time, the most famous school in the classical world, with Aristotle its most famous pupil.

Plato was convinced of the ultimately harmonious structure of the universe,

and his goal was to show the rational relationship and alignment between the soul, the state and the universe. In what is perhaps his best-known work, the *Republic*, Plato embarks on a long discussion about how an ideal state might embody the four great virtues: *temperance, justice, courage, and wisdom*.

This led him to ponder the issue of personal excellence in leadership: who should be considered to lead the ideal state? Plato utilizes epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics in order to answer this question, concluding that knowledge, learning, and judgment are the fundamental requirements. Implied in this conclusion is the idea that without any one of these, true leadership will elude. Believing that only those adhering to certain moral absolutes ought to be counted as leaders, Plato observed that the best-suited would undoubtedly shy from the distinction, recognizing that leadership requires relentless testing of one's character – rigor few would actively seek.

By today's standards, Plato aims uncomfortably high for most. And, detractors argue, what does epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics have to do with leadership? If he were alive today, Plato would say that epistemology is the study of knowledge, and seeks to answer the question: *What do we think we know?* Metaphysics is the study of what is real, and seeks to answer the question: *What is the current situation?* Ethics is concerned with living a virtuous life, and seeks to answer the question: *What is the right thing to do?* Plato undoubtedly would argue that these are the very questions that must absolutely guide any leader. Too, these are the same issues every leader must face in the defining moments of adversity, when critical actions must be taken, forcing decisions requiring reflection and reexamination of our very being. They are, in fact, the questions of life.

Finally, Plato classifies human beings based on their innate strength and intellect. In the famous *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato utilizes a “divided line” analogy to illustrate “four faculties of the soul” – what might best be defined as states of mind, or intellects: *perception, conviction, understanding, and reason*. These four intellects relate to, and are aligned with, the four cardinal virtues. According to Plato, all humans seek knowledge to some extent in all four areas – with a natural tendency toward one presiding over the other three. This tendency in turn influences the best use of one's natural gifts, ideally resulting in fulfillment of the pivotal roles in society: *agency, propriety, diplomacy, and philosophy*.

In *Absolute Impact*, each of the characters represents one of these four unique mindsets, enabling a universal treatment of the key issues. The character of Artenza (agency) embraces the virtue of *courage* and represents *perception*; the character of Dutamis (propriety) embraces the virtue of *temperance* and represents *conviction*; the character of Trutorio (diplomacy) embraces the virtue of *justice* and represents *understanding*; and the Prince (philosophy) embraces the virtue of *wisdom* and represents *reason*.

Maximus represents all those seeking maximum impact in work and life, and the Court might be any organization. And now to our story...

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Part One

