Thirty-seven years ago Bill George first convened what might be called a feedback and support lunch club for aspiring executives. Ever since, George and his half-dozen compatriots have met almost every Wednesday to discuss their lives and businesses. He now calls this his True North Group.

“I know there are areas about myself I’m just not capable of seeing—blind spots that real friends will point out to me,” George says. “We talk about our families, our companies, our health, everything. They have helped guide me to where I am today.”

Pretty good guidance: George is now a professor at Harvard Business School, having retired in 2002 as chairman of Medtronic, a fabulously successful, $16 billion medical device company that is the world’s largest in its industry. He’s also the author of four best-selling books, the most popular of which, *Truth North*, sets forth a set of leadership principles.

Three times a year under the Harvard Business School auspices, George teaches an executive training course he designed called Authentic Leadership Development. Eighty corporate leaders gather for an intense week of study, during which time George covers the profound need for any leader to have a circle of friends and advisers who provide unvarnished, compassionate but honest feedback about life, business and the choices both involve. Attendees
form groups of six to eight and remain with them throughout the program for guided activities and twice-daily discussions. During a seminar devoted to identifying one’s life purpose, participants are asked to imagine themselves on their deathbed and conversing with their granddaughter about what is most important in life.

“The next morning they sit down together and talk about that,” George explains. “Hopefully, each individual will have identified what matters to them—and their peers will challenge them to incorporate that in the actions they take when they leave.”

For this and other exercises during the six-day program, participants travel to Boston, live on the Harvard campus and pay $13,000. This executive camp of sorts represents a huge niche within the even more vast business of corporate training and development, a worldwide industry valued at $156 billion a year, according to the American Society for Training and Development—a figure that would place it at No. 6 on the Fortune 500 if it were a single company. Executive training and development make up roughly 6 percent of this industry; an additional 12 percent or more embraces managerial and supervisory training. The former ranges from matter-of-fact, one-day programs (lightly) covering communication skills, management tactics, strategic thinking and global business perspectives to week-or-more immersive programs focusing on personal characteristics, values and human potential leadership. Costs can run well past $13,000; one-day courses may be as economical as $600.

More extensive, multiday programs generally rely on guided exercises and activities, include work within smaller peer groups and focus on topics—character, purpose, integrity, values—that decades ago would have been considered frivolous next to discussions of management theory, marketing strategies and profit maximization.

But purpose in business and in life, says George, is not a quarterly earnings report. It’s not shareholder value. It’s not even profit, not that there’s anything wrong with profit, he says, at times. But purpose is more profound. Purpose is a more powerful chunk of value.

LADY GAGA AS BUSINESS CASE STUDY //

Harvard Business School professor Anita Elberse on what business can learn from entertainment’s biggest brands.


What can business leaders learn from pop culture’s biggest brands?

I often talk about how the entertainment business is a really good industry to study how brands develop over time. If you work in a consumer goods company, if you are lucky, you might see one product introduction in your entire career. If you work in the entertainment business, you see product releases all the time—20 or 25 a year if you work for a film studio. So in that sense there is a lot you can learn from the entertainment business.

Your core argument is that the best risk for Hollywood is the big bet—the blockbuster. Doesn’t this lead to a formulaic redundancy?

You could certainly make an argument that such big bets have become more formulaic, yes, because it’s simply too risky to gamble on something completely new. But some big gambles are highly acclaimed products. Take HBO’s Game of Thrones. It is a highly successful product and also something that pushes the boundaries of what we can expect of dramas on television. That is HBO’s blockbuster bet. More of their budget goes to that particular drama series than any of the other drama series. They are following the blockbuster model. I think it’s a narrow-minded view to say that Hollywood is just cranking out the same old stuff. They have produced some really magnificent movies that have been extraordinarily successful.

Marketing maverick Troy Carter is the real star in your Lady Gaga case study and he has even spoken in your class. What do you like about his approach?

He’s a brilliant manager. I was fascinated by the decisions he took early in her career that helped take her from an unknown to one of the planet’s biggest stars in just a couple of years.

Such as?

Early on, she was supposed to go on tour with Kanye West as a co-headliner. At the time, Kanye West was a much bigger star. But that tour fell through. The question for Team Gaga was: ‘Should we not do the tour? If we do the tour, are we going to do it solo? If we do it solo, are we going to much smaller theaters?’ If they went forward with that tour, it would be helpful in promoting her album and in establishing Gaga as someone who connects with the fans. It was a huge financial risk, but it worked.

Wait: Didn’t Gaga have anything to do with her own success?

You can’t do it without a very talented artist, right? Any marketer knows that you need a good product. But having a good product isn’t enough.

— Kevin Featherly
intrinsically wrong with all those. Real meaning comes from committing to something greater than oneself that makes a lasting difference.

“When you’re on your deathbed answering your granddaughter’s question about what you did with your life, you’re not going to say you had a 10 percent margin in the third quarter of 1998,” says George, noting that his greatest achievement at Medtronic was saving lives. “When I took over leading the company, we helped restore 300,000 people that year to a functional life. When I left, it was 70 million.”

That sense of purpose is close kin to an aspect of what personal behavior trainer and business theorist Stephen M. R. Covey focuses on: intent. Covey, whose famous father wrote The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, is himself the author of the 2006 bestseller The Speed of Trust, which describes the importance of trust in relationships. Intent, Covey says, may be the most important element in trust relationships. And he has created training programs that help participants understand and achieve trust.

“We challenge people to ask themselves, ‘What’s my motive for my request of or transaction with this other person?’ Ideally, it’s to seek mutual benefit, to exercise caring about people,” Covey says. “Declare your intent out loud, honestly. Doing so creates credibility. It’s common sense but it doesn’t happen nearly as often as it should.”

Speed of Trust workshop participants receive Trust Action Cards. Card No. 1, titled “Talk Straight,” advises recipients to “Tell the truth. Let people know where you stand.” It identifies “counterfeit” behaviors, such as flattery and beating around the bush.

Jeff Johnson, senior director of talent development at Frito-Lay headquarters in Dallas, took the Speed of Trust seminar in 2007 and later became certified to present Covey’s material himself, which he has done to thousands of workers within and outside of his company. “At first they think it’s a little strange,” Johnson says, “but after they’ve learned it they love it.”

At the other end of the spectrum are boutique operations such as the FranklinCovey, the $80 million brand that itself leads many of them. They’re part of a much, much larger catalog of training courses available from FranklinCovey, the $400 million brand and publicly traded company that has 44 offices offering services in more than 140 countries and is arguably the world leader in its field.

With a $170 million brand, the FranklinCovey Management Path, offered to the public and also to private organizations at costs that range from $300 to $1,800 per person, Covey himself leads many of them. They’re part of a much, much larger catalog of training courses available from FranklinCovey, the $80 million brand and publicly traded company that has 44 offices offering services in more than 140 countries and is arguably the world leader in its field.

Adventures Associates: This company melds challenge courses (low and high ropes activities, geotrekking, indoor rock climbing) with personality assessment tools such as the Meyers-Briggs. Costs start at $3,485. Can you really work better with your VP of sales after you’ve all built a bridge together? As Isaac Newton put it, “We build too many walls and not enough bridges.” adventuresassoci.com

Jim Lawless Quest Course: This two-day program on a 250-acre campus in Britain, England, is led by “just an ordinary bloke” who challenged himself to become a racing jockey (having never ridden before) and did in 12 months. Only open to companies, this program challenges participants with exercises to enable them to undertake “bold acts.” jimlawless.com

Himalaya Executive Leadership Program: Climb the world’s highest mountains, sit at the feet of Indian spiritual leaders and explore your inner depths under the guidance of Scandinavian business psychologists at this May 2014 program that’s challenging in almost every possible way. Enrollment is limited to 24. The cost: $13,190. cbs-executive.dk — E.L.
conducts about a dozen such sessions a year. The touchstone is Peter Drucker's axiom: "Management is doing things right—leadership is doing the right things." The Drucker Management Path embraces both ends of that thought. "Human beings are motivated not by money but by meaning," says Zachary First, Drucker Institute managing director. "But Drucker found that most people, while they may have personal priorities such as a sense of purpose, spend far too much time dealing with what he called 'posteriorities,' trivial wastes of time and energy. His principle was, do first things first—priorities—and other things not at all. Sounds simple, but one person's posteriority is almost always another person's priority. It can be very difficult not to do something that is not a priority for you but is extremely important for someone else."

Imagine telling your CEO you're not going to write memos because they're a waste of time. Ignoring somebody else's priority because for you it's a posteriority, isn't likely to make you popular. So what, says leadership guru Marshall Thurber, a disciple of Buckminster Fuller and W. Edwards Deming who has conducted leadership and personal growth workshops around the world for more than three decades. Thurber's programs—Dynamics of Leadership and Success Secrets for the 21st Century—are offered today mostly as commissioned, in-house sessions for corporate clients. The key idea he transmits: Leadership isn't the same as popularity.

"Leaders have low personal regard for the social convention of likability," Thurber says. "They learn that failure is just an occasion for learning that makes you stronger. We call that 'posttraumatic growth syndrome.' " His programs use high-intensity exercises and role-playing games to help participants recognize their purpose and strength.

Focusing on worthy long-term objectives, rather than illusory short-term targets such as quarterly margins, is a main facet of leadership programs sponsored by The W. Edwards Deming Institute. Widely considered the godfather of modern business theory, Deming created quality control initiatives that helped Japanese companies such as Toyota become world leaders; his grandson says his principles are as valid today as ever. "We live in a world of immense data—tons and tons of data, megadata it's called—but so what? My grandfather said information is not the same as knowledge," says Kevin Cahill, who volunteers as executive director of the Deming Institute. "You have to have a worthwhile and practical theory to guide your actions."

Helping business leaders understand and use what Deming meant is the subject of the institute's leadership and "quality learning" workshops. Offered the past few years as private and public seminars only in the Asia Pacific region, they will return to the United States next year with several public seminars.

There's a difference between a "personal ethic" and a "character ethic," says Catherine Nelson of FranklinCovey. Leadership derives from timeless principles of human effectiveness. "Are all your choices congruent with your responsibilities? How well do you manage your moods, your ethics, your 24-hour life?" she asks. During the five-day seminars...