



Principled

► Even Hollywood would have a tough time scripting a story to match his. That's because William W. ("Bill") George has already achieved so much – more than most of us would dream possible for one person in one lifetime – that a movie chronicling his life would likely be dismissed as too fanciful to be believed by a paying audience. But marketable or not, it is truly a noteworthy biography.

Elected an ExxonMobil director in May 2005, George is esteemed as one of America's most distinguished executives – a testament to a 30-year career leading several of its most successful businesses. Most recently, he served as chairman and CEO of Medtronic, the world's largest healthcare-technology company.

Today, George is a Professor of Management Practice at Harvard Business School, where he teaches leadership and leadership development.

Prior to joining the Harvard faculty in January 2004, George was Professor of Leadership and Governance at IMD International in Lausanne, Switzerland, and Executive in Residence at Yale University's School of Management.

George has enjoyed academic success throughout his life, a propensity he attributes

leadership personified

From the boardroom to the classroom, ExxonMobil Director William W. George brings to bear a powerful intellect, phenomenal business success and an expertise in leadership and corporate governance that have made him one of America's most influential and respected public figures.

to early influences, principally “a good childhood, loving parents and my Dutch upbringing in Grand Rapids, Michigan – very conservative, very frugal and very down to earth.”

Athletic achievement also came readily in his formative years. Early on, George recalls, “I spent a lot of time focused more on that (sports) than on the academic side,” adding with matter-of-fact understatement, “I would probably say that tennis was my best sport.” His team won the state championship his senior year.

Just as scholarly attainment and leadership have been the defining subtexts punctuating his intellectual endeavors, George has left his distinctive mark on every institution with which he has been associated. He received his BSIE with high honors from Georgia Tech and his MBA with high distinction from Harvard University, where he was a Baker Scholar.

In 1966, after graduating from Harvard Business School at age 23, George served for three years at the Pentagon – working first as Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense, and later as Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy.

“I had the privilege of meeting with a small group in the office of the Secretary of Defense every

Friday morning,” George explains. “It gave me the opportunity to observe many exceptional people – remarkable leaders such as Cyrus Vance and Paul Nitze.”

George credits his brief stint at the Pentagon and those “remarkable leaders” with teaching him valuable lessons about how government operates – lessons that have since served him well in positions of leadership in business and education.

Following his work in government, George began his career with Litton Industries, where he served for 10 years in leadership positions, principally as president of the corporation's microwave division. He then spent 10 years at Honeywell, including time as president of the company's Space and Aviation Systems division and president of Honeywell Europe.

In 1989, George joined Medtronic. Under his leadership, its market capitalization grew from \$1 billion to \$60 billion.

In 2002, having helped build Medtronic into the world's largest healthcare-technology company, he decided to take on new challenges and stepped down to return to his other passion – helping train tomorrow's leaders.

“One of the reasons I'm now teaching at Harvard,” George explains, “is to help ensure that the next generation of business

leaders is well grounded in their purpose, their focus and their core values.”

George believes it is important for future leaders to understand how a great corporation is managed. “ExxonMobil is one of the best examples on the planet of how you can run an ethically based company and be highly successful,” says George. “There is a direct correlation between strong corporate governance and strong long-term performance.”

“I'm a great believer in the capitalist, free-enterprise system,” says George. Whether you're in the healthcare business or the energy business, you are serving society by running your business well.”

Reflecting on his lifetime of stellar accomplishments, George says simply: “We have been very fortunate. Our two sons, Jeff and Jon, have embarked on successful careers in business and medicine. My wife, Penny, and I believe we have a responsibility to give back to our society. We've been fortunate to do well financially and have established The George Family Foundation, which is focused on integrated health, education, leadership and spirituality.”

Among the other organizations in which he is involved, George serves as a director of Goldman Sachs, Novartis

and Target Corporation. He is Chairman of the Global Center for Leadership and Business Ethics and also is on the board of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

William George is the author of “Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value,” and he was recently named one of “The 25 Most Influential Business People of the Last 25 Years” by PBS Nightly News. He is a recipient of the Alumni Achievement Award from Harvard Business School and the Legend in Leadership Award from Yale University. His corporate peers have honored him for his leadership and extraordinary achievements. He was named Executive of the Year by the Academy of Management (2001) and Director of the Year (2001 to 2002) by the National Association of Corporate Directors.

Taken in its entirety, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the William George story is “one of those cases in which the imagination is baffled by the facts” – to borrow a line from a leader George admires, and who likewise achieved uncommon success in multiple fields of human endeavor – Winston Churchill. And when it comes to leadership, by George, he also wrote the book. [theLamp](#)