There are lots of things I could have included on my list, so many will probably wonder how I chose the following 5 items. The following list contains the 5 items (6 including my bonus selection), which I’ve personally chosen to focus on (pursue) in the upcoming year:

1. **Family**: I’m going to approach this topic a bit differently than many – If you’re struggling with the family balance thing my advice is simple: don’t attempt to balance your family – make them your priority. I’ve simply lived too long to buy into the myth that success in the workplace will create happiness at home. While it makes for a nice sound bite to console those with a guilty conscience, IT IS A LIE. If your business is growing, but your spouse is crying and your children are neglected, it’s time to do a reality check on your priorities. If your assistant respects you, but your spouse doesn’t you have serious issues that need your immediate attention. If you would rather spend time with your online “friends” than with your children, it’s time to pull the ripcord on your internet connection. Here’s the cold hard truth…if you cheat your family to invest into your career, you and your loved ones will pay a very heavy price. It is simply wrong to value your workplace commitments over your family commitments – moreover it’s not necessary. If your focus is on your family, your career won’t suffer, it will flourish. Get this wrong and not only will your family suffer, but so will you as you someday mourn the loss of what could have been, but cannot be recovered.

2. **White Space**: While the mind of a leader may be most comfortable being oriented toward the future, he/she can only act in the here and now. The knowledge and skills required to master any endeavor only happens when we focus on what we’re currently doing. This is the definition of presence, and it is only when we operate in the present that real creativity, growth and innovation occur. The problem with being present is that many leaders confuse this with having to do everything themselves. Have you ever interacted with someone who deals with silence by jumping in and filling the conversational void? This same thing occurs with executives who attempt to fill every open slot on the calendar with activity – this is a huge mistake. Smart leaders don’t fill their calendars with useless activities; they strategically plan for white space allowing them to focus on highest and best use endeavors. Leading doesn’t always mean doing. In fact, most often times it means pulling back and creating white space so that others can do. This is true leadership that scales.

3. **Listening**: Want to become a better leader? Stop talking and start listening. Being a leader should not be viewed as a license to increase the volume of rhetoric. Rather astute leaders know there is far more to be gained by surrendering the floor than by dominating it. In this age of
instant communication everyone seems to be in such a rush to communicate what’s on their mind, they fail to realize the value of everything that can be gleaned from the minds of others. Show me a leader who doesn’t recognize the value of listening to others and I’ll show you a train-wreck in the making.

4. **Unlearning**: I’ve believed for quite some time the most profound and commonly overlooked aspect of learning is recognizing the necessity of *unlearning*. We’ve all acquired knowledge, beliefs or positions that but for the protection of our ego, would easily admit are outdated. I can think of no better definition for a closed mind than someone unwilling to change their opinions. Smart leaders recognize it’s much more valuable to step across mental lines in the sand than to draw them. Here’s the thing: No one has all the answers, so why even attempt to pretend that you do? Show me a person that never changes their mind, and I’ll show you a static thinker who has sentenced his mind to a prison of mediocrity and wasted potential. If the world is constantly changing, if the marketplace is always evolving, if the minds of others are continuously developing, how can you attempt to be unchanging and still be relevant? The smartest people I know are the most willing to change their minds. They don’t want to be right, they want the right outcome — they want to learn, grow, develop, and mature. Subjecting yourself to dissenting opinion allows you to refine your good ideas, weed out the bad ideas and acquire new ideas. Moreover, it’s the ability to evolve and to nuance thinking that leads to the change and innovation your organization needs to survive. Leaders and their ability to change their mind demonstrate humility, confidence and maturity. It makes them approachable, and it makes them human. People are looking for authentic, transparent leaders willing to sacrifice their ego in favor of right thinking.

5. **Engagement**: Leadership isn’t about you – it’s about those whom you lead and serve. There are few things as limiting and frustrating as disconnected leaders. Smart leaders spend their time starting or advancing conversations, not avoiding or ending them. The more you engage others, the better leader you’ll become. It’s nearly impossible to engender the type of confidence, trust, and loyalty a leader must possess without being fully engaged. In person, over the phone, via email, through the social web, or even by sending a good old fashion thank you note – ENGAGE.

6. **Bonus: Read**: There are few things which impact your thought life more than what you read. I’ve always been a voracious reader, and I plan to continue this pursuit in 2012. I read more than 70 books in 2011, and plan to read more than 100 books in 2012. To the person, the best leaders I know are prolific readers. My message today is a simple one – if you want to improve your station in life, as well as the lives around you – read more. The greatest leaders throughout history have been nothing short of relentless in their pursuit of knowledge. I believe Michelangelo said it best when he uttered the words “Ancora Imparo” which when translated from the Italian means “I am still learning.” By the way, his first public use of this phrase was noted to have been on his 87th Birthday. I don’t know about you, but I’m still learning (and unlearning). Moreover, the day I stop reading, the day I stop learning – that’s the day I stop leading, and likely the day I stop breathing.