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Leading with Character

Stories of Valor and Virtue and the Principles They Teach

John J. Sosik • Information Age Publishing © 2006 • 248 pages

Leadership / Business Leaders

Take-Aways

- The majority of employees don't feel motivated and some outright hate their jobs.
- A large majority of Americans believe that their country suffers from a leadership crisis.
- "Transformational leaders" demonstrate the character and motivational ability to run organizations during periods of intense change.
- Transformational leaders also help others learn how to be transformational leaders.
- Some charismatic leaders, such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, motivate people to do evil instead of good. They are called "pseudotransformational leaders."
- Transformational leaders share four qualities: "idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation" and "individualized consideration."
- Great leaders use their vision to inspire hope.
- Martin Luther King Jr., Pope John Paul II, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela were transformational leaders.
- Transformational leaders aren't afraid to show their vulnerability and compassion.
- Having too big an ego will destroy your ability to lead by example. People sense when leaders are trying to puff themselves up at others' expense.

Recommendation

The literature of leadership would fill a rather crowded library, but no one can learn how to be a great leader by simply reading about it. But since almost every organization has a strong need for leadership, reading about it may be a start. John Sosik studies how really great leaders succeed in the face of adversity, and he does an excellent job of categorizing the most important qualities leaders must have. A few of his 25 profiles of exceptional leaders lack the specificity needed to be truly instructive. Overall, however, *getAbstract* finds that while this book may not teach you how to be a great leader, it may inspire you to become one.

Summary

A Leadership Crisis

Two out of every three Americans think their country is in the midst of a leadership crisis, according to a 2005 Harvard University study. Moreover, respondents indicate that most leaders lack key qualities across the board, including integrity, honesty, skills, knowledge and the ability to inspire others. The results applied to government officials, politicians, business leaders, religious leaders, local leaders and state leaders.

“This is a story that defines the essence of outstanding leadership...told through the lives of 25 extraordinary leaders of character.”

Look no further than Enron, Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, Tyco and other organizations to see the devastating, even tragic, consequences of poor leadership. For example, a recent Gallup Poll found that 55% of those in the workforce don't like their work, and aren't engaged or motivated by their leaders. Another 17% hate their jobs. In many other countries, the lack of motivation is even worse. Today's business world misses having "transformational leaders of character," who can build the right cultures, motivate others and lead organizations through periods of intense change.

"Authentic Transformational Leadership"

Think of the people who have been a big influence on your life. Who really made a difference? Perhaps a parent, a coach, a pastor or a teacher touched your life and inspired you. They made you strive to accomplish something; they taught you and encouraged you to be a better person. People who do that are transformational leaders. They don't just make do with whatever exists. They motivate and drive others to accomplish things they probably never imagined they could do. Transformational leaders often change other people into transformational leaders themselves.

“A 2005 Harvard University study of confidence in leadership found that almost two-thirds of Americans think that we are suffering from a leadership crisis.”

Some people act like transformational leaders but motivate others to do bad things. These people, who exhibit "pseudotransformational leadership," are often out for their own glory and profit. Just as there are "good guy" examples, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa,

there are plenty of "bad guy" examples as well – Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Charles Manson. Charisma can be a force for good or evil.

“Today's leaders must navigate through cut-throat, morally challenging, and sometimes downright negative and nasty environments.”

True leaders demonstrate the "four I's of transformational leadership." They are:

1. "Idealized influence" – People admire strong leaders because their actions reflect "pro-social and positive behaviors." They become role models because people believe they are ethical, trustworthy and deserving of respect. General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt is one example: His company has committed itself to punishing any type of inaccurate or irresponsible financial-reporting activity.
2. "Inspirational motivation" – Transformational leaders are great motivators. They instill confidence and encourage high standards. They not only articulate their visions, but they also provide plans for how to achieve those goals. For example, Mary Kay Ash inspired women to succeed personally and financially by prioritizing "God first, family second and career third." Visionary leaders help focus everyone's efforts.
3. "Intellectual stimulation" – Transformational leaders challenge associates to seek alternative methods of attacking a problem and to question the status quo. These CEOs create an atmosphere of striving toward continual improvement.
4. "Individualized consideration" – Great leaders spend a lot of time listening. They want to understand their staff and their customers, and to consider each person's unique needs.

"The High Values"

Psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman have identified specific character strengths and virtues. They include:

- "Wisdom and knowledge" – It's not just how much you know that counts, but how well you apply your knowledge to a beneficial purpose.
- "Creativity" – Leaders must innovate, and to do so they have to be willing to think and perceive in new ways, and risk breaking out of stodgy old patterns.
- "Curiosity" – Leaders are open to new approaches and love to investigate and explore the unknown.
- "Open-mindedness" – They exercise "critical thinking" and don't jump to conclusions.
- "Love of learning" – They continually challenge themselves to learn new things and they enjoy doing it.
- "Perspective" – They are willing to examine a situation from several different points of view. They look for clarity.
- "Courage" – This is really an ability to marshal emotional strength despite "opposing forces from others and within yourself."
- "Persistence" – People of character strive toward their goals in spite of setbacks.
- "Humanity" – Great leaders display "love, kindness and social intelligence."
- "Justice" – You want to be viewed as fair. Part of being fair is showing an appreciation for teamwork and loyalty. Don't underestimate the importance of being a good citizen.

“The need to identify authentic leaders who avoid unethical and self-aggrandizing behaviors is more important than ever before.”

Other important values include extending mercy, having a sense of humor and inspiring hope in others. As Napoleon once observed, "Leaders are dealers in hope."

A Royal Example

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is an example of a truly transformative leader. He dreamed of a day when all people would say: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" But King had an uphill fight. He repeatedly faced violence and opposition. Opponents bombed his house after he took part in the Montgomery civil rights bus boycott. That did not stop him. He founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, organizing marches on behalf of desegregation. He was sprayed by fire hoses and received many death threats, as did his family. He and his followers suffered police brutality on "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. He continued to push for the equality of all people. Ultimately, King won a Nobel Peace Prize and the eternal gratitude of his countrymen. By practicing the principles of bravery, integrity, courage and persistence, he became a role model on how to lead with character.

"Humanity"

Being human helps transformational leaders connect with others, often by showing caring and even love. However, pride and ego can interfere with this natural connection between a leader and those who trust him or her. Demonstrate kindness and humility at every opportunity. "Look for the good in every person." Spend time with the people who contribute to your organization's success; try to understand their goals and desires. "Make your organization a haven of charity."

"Justice"

People have an innate sense of what is and isn't fair. Transformational leaders break through the normal silos and work with all types of people. This makes fairness especially important for leaders who are guiding organizations through challenges and change.

“Today, followers expect much more from their leaders.”

Make sure that talking about behavior – what is and isn't moral – is on your company's agenda. People, of course, will differ over questions of right and wrong behavior, but recognizing the key role of these concepts and giving them due consideration is even more important than consensus. This will help your employees operate as a team and will help you become a transformational leader.

Time for an Ego Check

Is your ego under control? The common characteristic of egotistical people is that they never admit they are self-centered. When Steve Jobs of Apple Computer was young, he had a reputation for having a big ego and a bad temper, and for making life miserable for many of his employees. Then he had a bout with pancreatic

cancer. In a June 2005 address at Stanford University, Jobs spoke about how battling cancer had changed his outlook. He was still driven, but he had learned to be more thoughtful and to channel his emotions.

“Transcendent individuals possess faith, a strong purpose in their lives.”

Moderating a potentially negative habit or characteristic is called "temperance." History is littered with examples of hard-charging leaders who didn't learn their lesson until it was too late. Many would count President Richard Nixon, Enron's Ken Lay, evangelist Jimmy Swaggart and CEO Al "Chainsaw" Dunlap among them. To become a truly great leader, you need to learn temperance. Ask yourself these questions to assess the size of your ego:

- Do you feel more important than anyone else in your company?
- Is getting a lot of praise important to you?
- When people disappoint you, do you react with anger?
- Do you enjoy showing your superiority over others?
- Are you set in your ways?
- Do you envy others in your organization?
- Do you speak of others' talents and successes as much as you criticize their failings?
- Do you resent it, or feel frustrated, when others get praise for their contributions?

“Courageous individuals remain industrious and persevere despite obstacles, challenges and setbacks.”

Truly outstanding leaders must learn:

- "Forgiveness" – You can't hold on to grudges or grievances if you want to attain greater accomplishments. Forgive those who have let you down.
- "Humility" – Pompous, arrogant leaders never have loyal subordinates: No one willingly follows them. Confidence is good, but when it turns to pride it can become a destructive force.
- "Prudence" – Aristotle considered prudence to be a "cardinal virtue" because it had such a powerful effect in so many areas. It can keep you from overstepping your bounds, and can help you avoid a short-term gain that could lead to a long-term loss. "Prudence," John Milton once said, "is the virtue by which we discern what is proper to do under various circumstances in time and place."
- "Self-control" – Be disciplined when you plan the direction in which your company will go. Don't respond to the first impulse to do anything. Leaders with self-control can openly receive feedback without feeling threatened, and they adjust their behavior and responses as needed.

“Transcendent individuals use humor in the form of comic relief and playfulness to encourage creativity or to take the edge off of stressful situations.”

Knowing about these qualities is not enough; you need to actually put them into practice. Study the lives of role models such as Warren Buffett, Intel's Andy Grove, Nelson Mandela and Eleanor Roosevelt to witness how much people who keep their egos in check are able to accomplish.

Becoming Transcendent

Great leaders have more than personality and management skills. When Fred Rogers, who hosted a landmark television show for children, went on stage to accept the Lifetime Achievement Emmy Award, he had a simple request for his audience: "All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, 10 seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are...10 seconds of silence. May God be with you." With that simple lesson of spiritual gratitude, which reflected the humble spirit that helped him bring hope to so many children, Rogers taught his audience a lesson about what success really means.

"Love of learning is an important foundation for leaders to identify new trends in the business environment and develop effective strategies for a new set of challenges."

Great leaders understand the value of connecting with others on a deeper, more meaningful level. Like an increasing number of leaders, they recognized the importance of spiritual connectedness. Spirituality – which "is not the same as religion" – gives you resilience and a sense of purpose. Spiritual leaders have several outstanding characteristics:

1. They display inspiration and motivation, and lead with a strong sense of purpose.
2. They focus not only on developing themselves, but also on developing others. In other words, "they feel compelled to build up people."
3. They promote open trust and display "idealized influence."
4. They "empower their followers and associates" and accept that others will see things differently. They have a high tolerance for diversity.

"Learn to sense and control your impulses. It helps to know what your vices are, so that you can work to temper them before they harm the way you interact with your followers or associates."

Becoming a transformational leader doesn't mean focusing only on what you say. What you do and who you are matter most. Learning that critically-important lesson will prepare you to lead with character.

About the Author

Dr. **John J. Sosik** is a professor at Pennsylvania State University, where he heads the Master of Leadership Development program, and teaches behavioral science and leadership. He co-authored *The Dream Weavers: Strategy-Focused Leadership in Technology-Driven Organizations*.



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