

LEADERS EAT LAST BY SIMON SINEK | BOOK SUMMARY

Leaders Eat Last is a fantastic read all about how leaders can create organisations and cultures that allow workers to go home at the end of the day feeling fulfilled by the work that they do. By creating an environment built on trust, teams will pull together again and again to help their tribe not just survive, but the flourish.

PART 1: OUR NEED TO FEEL SAFE

1. Protection from Above

Though we may not be asked to risk our lives or to save anybody else's, we would gladly share our glory and help those with whom we work succeed. More important, in the right conditions, the people with whom we work would choose to do those things for us. And when that happens, when those kinds of bonds are formed, a strong foundation is laid for the kind of success and fulfillment that no amount of money, fame or awards can buy. This is what it means to work in a place in which the leaders prioritize the well-being of their people and, in return, their people give everything they've got to protect and advance the well-being of one another and the organization.

Exceptional organizations all have cultures in which the leaders provide cover from above and the people on the ground look out for each other. This is the reason they are willing to push hard and take the kinds of risks they do. And the way any organization can achieve this is with empathy.

2. Employees Are People Too

Being a leader is like being a parent, and the company is like a new family to join. One that will care for us like we are their own . . . in sickness and in health. And if we are successful, our people will take on our company's name as a sign of the family to which they are loyal.

Leaders of organizations who create a working environment better suited for how we are designed do not sacrifice excellence or performance simply because they put people first. Quite the contrary. These organizations are among the most stable, innovative and high-performing companies in their industries.

To see money as subordinate to people and not the other way around is fundamental to creating a culture in which the people naturally pull together to advance the business.

3. Belonging

By creating a Circle of Safety around the people in the organization, leadership reduces the threats people feel inside the group, which frees them up to focus more time and energy to protect the organization from the constant dangers outside and seize the big opportunities. Without a Circle of Safety, people are forced to spend too much time and energy protecting themselves from each other.

It is easy to know when we are in the Circle of Safety because we can feel it. We feel valued by our colleagues and we feel cared for by our superiors. We become absolutely confident that the leaders of the organization and all those with whom we work are there for us and will do what they can to help us succeed.

4. Yeah, but . . .

As nice as it sounds to do all this, the reality is it's just not happening. And without those companies it is going to be harder for us to find a job in a company that truly does care about our well-being. So, we tell ourselves, what we have will have to do.

A supportive and well-managed work environment is good for one's health. Those who feel they have more control, who feel empowered to make decisions instead of waiting for approval, suffer less stress. Those only doing as they are told, always forced to follow the rules, are the ones who suffer the most. Our feelings of control, stress, and our ability to perform at our best are all directly tied to how safe we feel in our organizations.

PART 2: POWERFUL FORCES

5. When Enough Was Enough

Mother Nature figured out a lot earlier than our bosses, however, to use an incentive system to condition us to do certain things to achieve desired results. In the case of our biology, our bodies employ a system of positive and negative feelings—happiness, pride, joy or anxiety, for example—to promote behaviors that will enhance our ability to get things done and to cooperate. Whereas our bosses might reward us with an end-of-year bonus, our bodies reward us for working to keep ourselves and those around us alive and looked after with chemicals that make us feel good. And now, after thousands of years, we are all completely and utterly chemical-dependent.

Serotonin and oxytocin incentivize us to work together and develop feelings of trust and loyalty. I like to call these the “selfless” chemicals. They work to help strengthen our social bonds so that we are more likely to work together and to cooperate, so that we can ultimately survive and ensure our progeny will live on beyond us.

6. E.D.S.O.

Two chemicals—endorphins and dopamine—are the reason that we are driven to hunt, gather and achieve. They make us feel good when we find something we’re looking for, build something we need or accomplish our goals. These are the chemicals of progress.

Endorphins serve one purpose and one purpose only: to mask physical pain. That’s it. Think of endorphins as our own personal opiate. Often released in response to stress or fear, they mask physical pain with pleasure.

Dopamine is the reason for the good feeling we get when we find something we’re looking for or do something that needs to get done. It is responsible for the feeling of satisfaction after we’ve finished an important task, completed a project, reached a goal or even reached one of the markers on our way to a bigger goal.

Serotonin is the feeling of pride. It is the feeling we get when we perceive that others like or respect us. It makes us feel strong and confident, like we can take on anything. And more than confidence boosting, it raises our status.

Oxytocin is most people’s favorite chemical. It’s the feeling of friendship, love or deep trust. It is the feeling we get when we’re in the company of our closest friends or trusted colleagues. It is the feeling we get when we do something nice for someone or someone does something nice for us. It is responsible for all the warm and fuzzies.

7. The Big C

Cortisol inhibits the release of oxytocin, the chemical responsible for empathy. This means that when there is only a weak Circle of Safety and people must invest time and energy to guard against politics and other dangers inside the company, it actually makes us even more selfish and less concerned about one another or the organization.

Our bodies release cortisol to help us stay alive. If we work in an environment in which leadership tells the truth, in which layoffs are not the default in hard times and in which incentive structures do not pit us against one another, the result,

thanks to the increased levels of oxytocin and serotonin, is trust and cooperation.

8. Why We Have Leaders

Leaders are the ones willing to look out for those to the left of them and those to the right of them. They are often willing to sacrifice their own comfort for ours, even when they disagree with us. Trust is not simply a matter of shared opinions. Trust is a biological reaction to the belief that someone has our well-being at heart. Leaders are the ones who are willing to give up something of their own for us. Their time, their energy, their money, maybe even the food off their plate. When it matters, leaders choose to eat last.

PART 3: REALITY

9. The Courage to Do the Right Thing

The responsibility of a leader is to provide cover from above for their people who are working below. When the people feel that they have the control to do what's right, even if it sometimes means breaking the rules, then they will more likely do the right thing. Courage comes from above. Our confidence to do what's right is determined by how trusted we feel by our leaders.

If good people are asked to work in a bad culture, one in which leaders do not relinquish control, then the odds of something bad happening go up. People will be more concerned about following the rules out of fear of getting in trouble or losing their jobs than doing what needs to be done. And when that happens, souls will be lost.

10. Snowmobile in the Desert

If the human being is a snowmobile, this means we were designed to operate in very specific conditions. Take that machine designed for one kind of condition—snow—and put it in another condition—the desert, for example—and it won't operate as well. Sure, the snowmobile will go. It just won't go as easily or as well as if it were in the right conditions. This is what has happened in many of our modern organizations. And when progress is slow or innovation is lacking, leaders tinker with the machine. They hire and fire in hopes of getting the right mix. They develop new kinds of incentives to encourage the machine to work harder.

PART 4: HOW WE GOT HERE

11. The Boom Before the Bust

The Boomer generation would emerge bigger and more powerful than any opposing force that could help keep things in check. Without a balancing tension, the impulses and desires of one group would prove to be hard to restrain. Like the unchecked power of America after the fall of the Soviet Union, like the dictator who overthrows his predecessor, like legislation passed when one party has a supermajority in Congress, the Boomers would start to impose their will on the world around them, surrounded only by outnumbered voices telling them they couldn't. By the 1980s and 1990s, this "shockwave," this "pig in the python," as the Baby Boom is sometimes described because of its sheer size and force, this demographic bulge able to remodel society as they passed through it, was fully in charge.

12. The Boomers All Grown Up

The big Boomer generation has, by accident, created a world quite out of balance. And imbalance, as history has proven over and over, will self-correct suddenly and aggressively unless we are smart enough to correct it ourselves slowly and methodically. Given our inclination for instant gratification and the weak Circles of Safety in our organizations, however, our leaders may not have the confidence or patience to do what needs to be done.

We no longer see each other as people; we are now customers, shareholders, employees, avatars, online profiles, screen names, e-mail addresses and expenses to be tracked. The human being really has gone virtual. Now more than ever, we are trying to work and live, be productive and happy, in a world in which we are strangers to those around us. The problem is, abstraction can be more than bad for our economy . . . it can be quite deadly.

PART 5: THE ABSTRACT CHALLENGE

13. Abstraction Kills

Abstraction is no longer restricted to physical space; it also includes the abstracting nature of numbers. The bigger our companies get, the more physical distance is created between us and the people who work for us or buy our products. At such scale, we can no longer just walk into the aisles and count the cans of soup on the shelf either. Now we rely on documents that report the numbers of what we've sold and how much we've made. When we divorce ourselves from humanity through numerical abstraction, we are capable of inhuman behavior. The more abstract people become, the more capable we are of doing them harm.

14. Modern Abstraction

When our leaders give us something noble to be a part of, offer us a compelling purpose or reason why we should come to work, something that will outlive us, it seems to give us the power to do the right thing when called upon, even if we have to make sacrifices to our comfort in the short term. And when a leader embraces their responsibility to care for people instead of caring for numbers, then people will follow, solve problems and see to it that that leader's vision comes to life the right way, a stable way and not the expedient way.

15. Managing the Abstraction

Rule 1. Keep It Real—Bring People Together. Real, live human interaction is how we feel a part of something, develop trust and have the capacity to feel for others. It is how we innovate.

Rule 2. Keep It Manageable—Obey Dunbar's Number. Professor Dunbar figured out that people simply cannot maintain more than about 150 close relationships.

Rule 3. Meet the People You Help. As social animals, it is imperative for us to see the actual, tangible impact of our time and effort for our work to have meaning and for us to be motivated to do it even better.

Rule 4. Give Them Time, Not Just Money. A leader of an organization can't simply pay their managers to look out for those in their report. A leader can, however, offer their time and energy to those in their care, and in turn those managers would be more willing to give their time and energy to their subordinates.

Rule 5. Be Patient—The Rule of Seven Days and Seven Years. I have no data to say exactly how long it takes to feel like we trust someone. I know it takes more than seven days and I know it takes fewer than seven years. I know it is quicker for some and slower for others. No one knows exactly how long it takes, but it takes patience.

16. Imbalance

"Destructive Abundance" is what I call the result of this imbalance. It is what happens when selfish pursuits are out of balance with selfless pursuits. When the levels of dopamine-incentivized behaviors overwhelm the social protections afforded by the other chemicals. When protecting the results is prioritized above protecting those who produce the results. Destructive Abundance happens when the players focus almost exclusively on the score and forget why they set out to play the game in the first place.

PART 6: DESTRUCTIVE ABUNDANCE

17. Leadership Lesson 1: So Goes the Culture, so Goes the Company

Inside a Circle of Safety, when people trust and share their successes and failures, what they know and what they don't know, the result is innovation. It's just natural.

18. Leadership Lesson 2: So Goes the Leader, so Goes the Culture

The role of the leader is not to bark commands and be completely accountable for the success or failure of the mission. It is a leader's job instead to take responsibility for the success of each member of his crew. It is the leader's job to ensure that they are well trained and feel confident to perform their duties. To give them responsibility and hold them accountable to advance the mission. If the captain provides direction and protection, the crew will do what needs to be done to advance the mission.

19. Leadership Lesson 3: Integrity Matters

Building trust requires nothing more than telling the truth. That's it. No complicated formula. For some reason too many people or leaders of organizations fail to tell the truth or opt to spin something to appear that they did nothing wrong.

Every single one of us should look at our managers or the leaders of the companies we work for and ask ourselves, "Would I want to be in a foxhole with you?" And the managers and the leaders of companies who rely on our hard work should, in turn, ask themselves, "How strong is our company if the answer is no?"

20. Leadership Lesson 4: Friends Matter

There is something about getting together out of context that makes us more open to getting to know someone. Whether we're bonding with colleagues with whom we play on the company softball team, out to lunch or on a business trip with someone we don't know well, when the responsibilities of our jobs are not forcing us to work together, when our competing interests are put aside for a while, we seem to be quite open to seeing others as people rather than coworkers or competitors.

21. Leadership Lesson 5: Lead the People, Not the Numbers

The performance of a company is closely tied to the personality and values of the person at the top. And the personality and values of the person at the top set the tone of the culture.

It is a given that profit is the goal of any business, but to suggest it is the primary responsibility of a business is misguided. It is the leaders of companies that see profit as fuel for their cultures that will outlast their dopamine-addicted, cortisol-soaked competitors.

PART 7: A SOCIETY OF ADDICTS

22. At the Center of All Our Problems Is Us

Leadership is about taking responsibility for lives and not numbers. Managers look after our numbers and our results and leaders look after us. All managers of metrics have an opportunity to become leaders of people. Just as every doctor in our country learned the importance of sterilizing their instruments, so too must every leader of every organization do the little things necessary to protect their people. But first, they have to admit they are at the root of the problem.

Mother Nature could not have imagined or prepared us for a time when chemicals like nicotine and alcohol would be available to short-circuit our reward systems. Dopamine was built for a time when food was not so readily available. Our bodies weren't built for a food-whenever-we-want-it world. Bingeing, gambling, drinking and smoking are all, ostensibly, dopamine addictions. They are easy ways to get the shot of dopamine we love and crave. And when we are unable to keep our desire for those dopamine bursts in check, they become addictions. We reach a point where a chemical designed to help keep us alive actually rewards us for engaging in behaviors that can harm us. This is exactly what has been happening in our corporate cultures where incentive programs create environments ripe for a new kind of dopamine-driven addiction. We are addicted to performance.

23. At Any Expense

Whether it is a congressman courting donors instead of spending more time responding to the needs of constituents or a leader of a company who opts to sell a product they know might have harmful ingredients because it is profitable, the race to win has always existed and has always caused problems. In healthy organizations, as in a healthy society, the drive to win should not precede the desire to take care of the very people we claim to serve.

24. The Abstract Generation

Where alcohol replaced trusting relationships as a coping mechanism for teenagers who grew up to be alcoholics, so too are the positive affirmations we get from social media and the virtual relationships we maintain replacing real trusting relationships as coping mechanisms.

A side effect could be a generation that struggles to find happiness and fulfillment even more than the generations that preceded them. Though there is a desire to do good, their acculturated impatience means that few will commit time or effort to one thing long enough to see the effect of service—the thing we know gives a sense of fulfillment. In doing research for this book, I kept meeting amazing, wonderful, smart, driven and optimistic Gen Yers who were either disillusioned with their entry-level jobs or quitting to find a new job that will “allow me to make an impact in the world,” discounting the time and energy that is required to do it.

PART 8: BECOMING A LEADER

25. Step 12

Few if any of the alcoholics enrolled in AA will find sobriety until they complete Step Twelve. Even if they make it through all the other eleven steps, those who do not complete Step Twelve are very likely to drink again. It is those who complete Step Twelve who overcome the addiction.

Step Twelve is the commitment to help another alcoholic beat the disease. Step Twelve is all about service. And it is service that is the key to breaking our dopamine addictions in our organizations too.

26. Shared Struggle

If our species thrives when we are forced to work together to manage through hardship, then what we need to do is redefine hardship for our modern age of abundance. We need to learn how to readapt. To understand how to operate as we were designed within these complicating conditions. To the relief of many readers, we do not need to give up our abundance and live a monk's life to do this. Our challenge is that our visions of the future are confined to our means. We need to reframe our visions to outsize the resources we have to realize them.

27. We Need More Leaders”

Leadership is not a license to do less; it is a responsibility to do more. And that's the trouble. Leadership takes work. It takes time and energy. The effects are not always easily measured and they are not always immediate. Leadership is always a commitment to human beings.

Everything about being a leader is like being a parent. It is about committing to the well-being of those in our care and having a willingness to make sacrifices to see their interests advanced so that they may carry our banner long after we are gone.