

Meditations – Marcus Aurelius

Book review

Meditations is easily one of the most interesting books I've read. We hear and talk about the Romans all the time and yet many of us seem to have missed an experience like Meditations. Including myself. One thing is certain about the Roman Empire, and that is that without proper leadership, they would have never succeeded in their endeavors. Reading about Marcus' view on life was eye-opening. I never thought my perspective on life would be like an Emperor's from over 2000 years ago. How could it? Life today is nothing like it was back then. Yet Marcus still talks about the greats such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Homer, and many more that to this day, are brought up daily. So, then it hit me. Outside of technology and modern issues, we weren't so different. Marcus could point out every skill and thought that was taught to him from each key individual in his life. Funnily enough, even he had a friend who would always correct others' grammar (none other than The Literary Critic Alexander). Being able to differentiate how these individuals helped him is how he became a leader. A simple formula that seems to pass everyone's head. A simple formula that is hard to mix naturally. How does one mold into an Emperor of the great Roman Empire? Easy. Leadership. Out of all the people mentioned in his book, no one comes close to his grandfather who had adopted Marcus who shared the same name (Marcus Annius Verus). His adopted father was the man he had looked up to the most. When you read about him, it's easy to see why. The traits that he shared (compassion, lack of self-indulgence, humble, complete control of emotions, etc.) are what a true leader needs to have. Even though he was one of the richest families in all the Roman Empire, he possessed great values and Marcus Aurelius inherited them. The attributes in a

leader then are no different to a leader now. There are few people in this world that are truly leaders. I say that with confidence. It could be teen anger towards our parents, distaste to our bosses, or resentment towards a teacher. These are all authoritative figures in our lives who will tell us what to do, for the better or the worse. I look back at the times my parents were rough on me and the anger I felt towards them. Now I can see that they were looking out for me. In the book, Marcus says "If anyone can refute me – show me I'm making a mistake or looking at things from the wrong perspective – I'll gladly change. It's the truth I'm after, and the truth never harmed anyone. What harms us is to persist in self-deceit and ignorance." (#21 on Book 6). It is one of the most straight forward concepts, yet something we don't see in many people who are supposed to be our leaders. We have those with leadership titles who lack these traits. I look at a company like Sears. A multi-billion-dollar company whose roots began with "build your own home" sets. Now the company has fallen. All their stores are closing, and everyone is getting laid off. They fell off because the executives, shareholders, and overall leaders of the company had failed to adapt to current times. They had everything in place to be the beast that would become Amazon. Yet they insisted on keeping their stores the same and not worrying, and now look where they are. There isn't a doubt in my mind that they had employees or even random individuals telling them what's going to happen, and how to prepare for it. This quote from the book sums it up perfectly, "According to this theory, man is like a dog tied to a moving wagon. If the dog refuses to run along with the wagon he will be dragged by it, yet the choice remains his: to run or be dragged."

(Chapter:Introduction by Gregory Hays). Now we take that back to the Roman Empire time.

Marcus sees how a bad emperor (Nero) functions, and how a good emperor (Vespasian)

functions. He knows what doesn't work, and what does. The same can be said with a manager at work. Now at my old job, I worked in a post office. The only leadership to be seen was how to operate certain machines and regulations towards sending packages. There wasn't much room for me to experience leadership in a bigger picture. In the future when I begin my career as a software developer, I will be looking towards these traits. Any company that has blasted to the top has had a priceless leader. Elon Musk of Tesla and SpaceX or Bill Gates of Microsoft. These are humans just like everyone else. Yet look what they achieved. There are so many companies out there with the potential to do great if they had a competent leader.

Now let's talk about the impact of shifting the current leadership model. However, I will be talking about my time at an older job. Best Buy to be exact. Best Buy is known for its lack of success nowadays. When they closed hundreds of Future Shops/Best Buys and let off a couple thousand people, it's easy to say there was a lack of direction and leadership within. One example I'd like to pinpoint is the managers ran on fear of their higher-ups. This wasn't the case of the managers in store necessarily, but the managers in head office who overlooked the retail locations. While I was working there, I had experienced many situations I would consider bad leadership, trickling down from the top like a waterfall. An example would be that when they looked at the sales numbers during closing, they would always look for the warranty attach rate. It was one of their top priorities. And it makes sense. There is nothing but profit when you attach warranty. However, they started worrying more about attaching warranty than the gross profit and because of that, I feel like all the stores were taking massive hits. They were discounting the price of the TV or computer, so they could add on the warranty at a lower price. This was horrible leadership because now the company was gaining less money than just selling

it with no warranty. But hey, the numbers looked good, so it was fine, right? At the time I was too young and inexperienced to even notice it was a problem. Now that we're talking about leadership and how it could be added into an organization, it hit me. The orders that everyone was getting from their higher ups was more of a self-indulging interest than the company's interest. Even when we were told that a customer can't return a certain product because of a certain reason, they could still return it by yelling at the manager, which in turn gave them whatever they wanted. For our managers to teach us certain rules just to have them throw us under the bus when it happens was horrible leadership. If I was to implement leadership right now I would make sure to stand by my values. How can one be a leader if they don't practice what they preach? Marcus Aurelius said in his book, "What injures the hive injures the bee" (Chapter: Book 6). This culture being created that the company will bend over to any yelling customer is a huge part of Best Buy's downfall. This also spread to all the employees because now, they would do anything to get the warranty added on. Even make the company lose money so that their own numbers would look good! There was a lack of leadership in that sense. Shifting it towards a culture of having a backbone and keeping your word would have helped the company, and its employees tremendously.

Implementing leadership development in this setting would be a challenge. Especially due to it being retail and no commission. How I would start it is to be a poster child of a true retail manager. Show examples by phenomenal customer service skills, and dealing with customers fairly. Even if it means saying no. "If the crew talked back to the captain, or patients to their doctor, then whose authority would they accept? How could the passengers be kept safe or the patient healthy?" (Chapter: Book 6). This quote fits very well in this situation. If our

leaders, the people we look up to, are not executing the values of what we were taught, how is it going to be overall? It would be mayhem. People would be doing whatever they like at work and the company would lose money quickly. This is honestly the only way to implement it in a retail environment. Everyone goes through the training that's done on the computer, but it doesn't get embedded into the mind until the mind sees it happening in person.

As for how I would refine my own leadership style? Well, I'd take a lot from Marcus' adopted father. This man raised Marcus to have the mind of an emperor. There is a lot that I can learn. I can have a hard time being patient when someone is trying something for the first time that I am experienced with. Never to say anything aloud, but mentally. "He never exhibited rudeness, lost control of himself, or turned violent. Everything was to be approached logically and with due consideration, in a calm and orderly fashion but decisively, and with no loose ends." (Chapter: Book 1: Debts and Lessons). This alone is a lesson many could use. Repeatedly I've seen managers go off on anger tantrums. Now we're all guilty of being very angry. We're only human. It's important to remember the words of a man who raised an emperor the next time we start getting agitated. Other ways of refining my leadership would be to grab the bits and pieces of key individuals in my life that stand out, and use that to mold in some great leadership traits. It's easier said than done. And of course, not all of us could gear ourselves to become an Emperor. Another quote that stuck out to me is "If it's in your control, why do you do it? If it's in someone else's, then who are you blaming? Atoms? The gods? Stupid either way. Blame no one. Set people straight, if you can. If not, just repair the damage. And suppose you can't do that either. Then where does blaming people get you? No pointless actions." (Chapter: Book 8). This is apparent in today like no other. Blaming others for your own

lack of success. As if the universe is out to get you. When major influencers on social media create a culture of blaming others, it does some heavy damage. This is something I did refine on my own. When I was younger it was easy to find someone to blame for something happening. It came with the immaturity and lack of life experience. As one grows older they need to start realizing that you will have to work very hard to get where you want. Even when I was explaining the issues of leadership in Best Buy, I was pointing the finger to my managers who exhibited those issues. The way it should have been dealt with at that time was to simply speak up and practice what I preach. This fixes with time and now I can see where I was in the wrong. It's good to learn from your mistakes and to understand that you are human. A leader will acknowledge their wrong-doings and fix it. This is how a young man had such a successful life within the Roman Empire, and how his words still stand to today. "if you can't stop prizing a lot of other things? Then you'll never be free—free, independent, imperturbable. Because you'll always be envious and jealous, afraid that people might come and take it all away from you. Plotting against those who have them—those things you prize. People who need those things are bound to be a mess—and bound to take out their frustrations on the gods. Whereas to respect your own mind—to prize it—will leave you satisfied with your own self, well integrated into your community and in tune with the gods as well—embracing what they allot you, and what they ordain." (Chapter: Book 6). A great leader will have confidence in himself and his actions, and will persevere when the time comes.

Aurelius, M. (2002). *Meditations: A New Translation* (G. Hays, Trans.). New York, NY: Modern Library.