



# Book The Leader's Companion

## Insights on Leadership Through the Ages

J. Thomas Wren  
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### Recommendation

Do you know how ancient authorities such as Plato or Machiavelli defined leadership? What about current historians and psychologists such as James MacGregor Burns or John W. Gardner? In this excellent compilation you are sure to find your philosophical kin. Editor J. Thomas Wren presents a series of thoughtful essays on every aspect of leadership by some of the world’s greatest thinkers, from Aristotle to Gandhi, and Leo Tolstoy to W.E.B. Du Bois. Each essay seems indubitably to be the last word on leadership – at least, until you get to the next one. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to CEOs, government officials, military commanders, clergy, supervisors, police chiefs and mayors – in short, anyone who leads others.

### Take-Aways

- Philosophers have spilled rivers of ink trying to define leadership.
- Leaders often have certain attributes in common, such as intelligence, adaptability and self-confidence.
- Some people fear that great leaders have become extinct.
- However, “citizen-” or “servant-leaders” always seem to show up when needed.
- Leadership is a defining human trait.
- Leaders and followers have common interests and strive for common goals.
- When leaders fail to think critically and challenge assumptions, they shepherd their followers toward disaster.
- Businesses employ too many managers and too few leaders.
- Many moth-eaten leadership maxims are outmoded in today’s age of empowerment.
- Leadership is no longer top-down. It is bottom-up.

### Summary

#### Leadership

Few agree on what leadership is or how to define it. Historian James MacGregor Burns claims that leadership is “one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth.” Throughout history, great minds have studied leadership and tried to explain it to others. This includes philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato, writers such as Leo Tolstoy, politicians such as Machiavelli, and social activists such as Mohandas Gandhi and W.E.B. Du Bois.

“One of the most universal cravings of our time is for compelling and creative leadership.” [ – James MacGregor Burns]

These thinkers differ radically on even basic definitions. Thomas Carlyle believed in the “great man” theory of history, with Napoleon as his model, while Tolstoy called leaders “history’s slaves.” Throughout the ages, scholars have debated questions related to leadership: What is the leader’s role? How should the leader relate to his or her followers? Who are the followers and what is their role? What about the effects of gender on leadership? How do the demands of leadership change from one environment to the next?

#### Where Are Today’s Great Leaders?

Although the definition of leadership is slippery, many agree that, whatever it is, it's sadly lacking in today's world. They charge that finding good leaders at any level – international, national, local or organizational – is difficult. Wherever you look, baffling problems abound: crime, poverty, health care, drug abuse, terrorism, environmental decay, national and international security. Similarly, in the business world, challenges sometimes seem intractable. Corporations are filled with an excess of managers but few real leaders.

“Many people still believe that leaders are born and not made.” [ – Thomas E. Cronin]

As problems multiply, many wonder where the leaders are who will solve them. They claim that the world is experiencing a “crisis of leadership.” But perhaps this plea for leaders is shorthand for deep anxieties about problems so confusing they seem to have no solutions. Or maybe those who decry leadership failures are in fact longing for a parent figure who will come in and magically make all problems disappear. Thus, the issue of responsible leadership is a continuum, with an apparent lack of effective leadership at one end and an immature need for a powerful authority figure to set everything right at the other.

“Learn to lead without coercion.” [ – Lao-tzu]

Whatever you call it or however you define it, leadership has always been an absolutely vital human function. Thus, the literature on leadership is ancient. The topic has been a concern not only of the ruling class or the privileged few but of all of society – rich, poor and middle-class. After all, a leader is nothing without people to lead, and followers come from all walks of life.

“Effective leaders have a high degree of knowledge about the company, industry and technical matters.” [ – Shelly A. Kirkpatrick and Edwin A. Locke]

Leadership is probably best understood not as a trait but as an interaction between leaders and followers, which often arises as a result of a mutual interest. It takes place in some notable context – war, economic crisis or social strife. According to James MacGregor Burns, leadership is “transactional” and “transforming.” Both the leaders and the followers change as a result of the relationship.

“No amount of egalitarian idealism will change the fact that there will be followers as long as human beings inhabit the planet.” [ – Joseph C. Rost]

Understanding leadership is vital if leaders and followers are to achieve their goals. Only in leader-follower interactions can individuals work together to improve cultures, nations, businesses and the world.

## “Dispersed Leaders”

The problems that confront society are maddeningly bleak. Easy solutions do not exist. Considering this, many throw up their hands in disgust. They believe that solving the world's current problems is impossible. But this is defeatist thinking. With a concerted leadership effort at every level, people can improve their situations.

“The notion that appearances by Great Men (or Great Women) are necessary preconditions for the emergence of major movements for social changes reflects ... a poor understanding of history.” [ – Claybourne Carson]

Leadership is often dispersed among millions of people, who together take the responsibility for making things right. These “servant-” or “citizen-leaders” somehow always appear at times of pressing need. Societies can create leaders through active leadership development activities. Leadership creation has sparked the thoughts of the following modern managers and classical philosophers:

- **Richard A. Couto** – Citizen-leaders selflessly strive to improve the lives and working conditions of people who live in poor areas or who have been shortchanged by life. Citizen-leaders rarely seek power. Rather, they attempt to enact change, and in doing so accept responsibility.
- **Warren Bennis** – Think of leadership as the means by which organizations achieve and sustain their goals. According to this definition, to be an effective CEO is not to be a supermanager but rather to be a great leader.
- **Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett and Gordon J. Curphy** – Leadership consists of striving to achieve common goals that people agree are important. Leaders and followers are mutually interdependent. Leadership is meaningless without followers.
- **Aristotle** – Before leaders can start issuing commands, they must be ready to accept commands from others. Justice demands no less. Monarchs are in no way superior to average citizens.
- **Lao-tzu** – True leaders are selfless. They are not egocentric. Their effectiveness depends on self-subordination and lack of bias. Leaders are like water. Both yield yet both are powerful. True leaders are never self-assertive. As a result, their followers do not resist their leadership, but follow it gladly.

## Leadership Traits

Studies of leaders indicate that they all possess certain traits. Great leaders are intelligent, learned, confident and popular. They are good communicators. They are ambitious, aggressive, dependable and adaptable. They take the initiative. They do not quit when times get tough. They know how to make change happen. Often, leaders are athletic and hardy, although such factors as age, weight, height and appearance do not seem to correlate in any meaningful way with good leadership.

“Leadership is like any other human talent: Some people are more inclined toward it than others, but there are some techniques that can be taught.” [ – Roger B. Smith]

However, research also indicates that the possession of these traits does not in itself result in the emergence of a leader. More important is how individuals use those traits. Through their actions, individuals with leadership traits stand out.

Leaders must be able to “think critically,” or challenge their assumptions and the status quo. Great leaders look at problems and situations from a variety of perspectives. This enables them to identify the “forces of change” and to develop strategies to achieve their goals. When leaders fail to think critically, the results for followers can be disastrous, from wasted effort to actual danger.

“Only a decade ago, we didn’t automatically assume that CEOs would be aggressive corporate image builders or public spokespeople.” [ – Michele Darling]

A study of 90 CEOs shows that their common traits are vision and the ability to communicate their vision to various constituencies. These leaders are able to maintain their focus even in the midst of chaos. They empower others, that is, they put others’ talents, abilities and energies to work, to achieve common goals. They are great “impression managers” and enjoy performing before “packed houses.” The following are some thoughts by philosophers and managers about the traits and goals of good leaders:

- **John W. Gardner** – Historically, leaders had challenging yet relatively straightforward tasks. Moses led his people from Egypt. Leonidas led his Spartan army to defend Thermopylae. In contrast, today’s leaders must work within complex institutions that may include baffling processes and interdependencies, and that exist within remarkably convoluted environments. Thus, progress is seldom easy to achieve. The great leader is the one who finds a way forward.
- **Charles C. Manz and Henry P. Sims Jr.** – Napoleon, Caesar, George Washington and Alexander the Great represent the traditional model of leadership. But “great leaders on a white horse” are becoming increasingly outmoded. Current leaders are the sparks that ignite people’s passion to become the best they can be and to realize their full potential. The leader’s iron will is not important today; rather, leaders must be able to inspire others.
- **Judy B. Rosener** – Women executives have discovered methods to lead that differ from the traditional “command-and-control” style long associated with men. Many lead in a more interactive way that involves the sharing of information and authority. This approach works well in modern organizations.
- **Geert Hofstede** – In organizations, leaders are the executives and managers. How employees and others regard this class depends on where you live. In the U.S., managers are the heroes, but in Germany engineers rule. In Japan, the managerial class is less important than “permanent worker groups” or teams.
- **Thomas E. Cronin** – Democracy cannot function without superior leaders who compete with each other over issues of substance, style, ideas and programs. However, democratic leaders are not “Mount Rushmore leaders” who are cast in stone. Rather, they are citizen leaders who emerge as duty and liberty require.

## Paradigm Change

The 21st century is a new era in thinking about leadership. Old ideas – for example, that “the boss” has all the answers, never errs and makes all the decisions about organizational direction and strategy – have no place in businesses in today’s empowered workplaces. The new leadership paradigm includes these ideas:

- Leadership is not a top-down phenomenon. It is participatory. Everyone leads.
- Leaders should not be dictators who issue commands but rather motivators who encourage everyone to deliver his or her best.
- Executives must be more than managers of day-to-day processes; they must be able to keep the big picture in view.
- Leaders must be more than ambitious goal setters and achievers. They must be humanists: well-rounded, individuals who take a holistic approach.
- Leaders must be able to deal with change.

“The most appropriate leader is one who can lead others to lead themselves.” [ – Charles C. Manz and Henry P. Sims Jr.]

To find out whether you measure up to this paradigm, ask yourself these questions:

- Do you get lost in the trappings of leadership, or do you pay attention to organizational culture and values?
- Do you tell others what to do and then hope for the best, or do you motivate others and expect the best?
- Do you jealously guard your status as leader, or do you help others to become leaders and to rise along with you?
- Do you just talk a good game? Does your behavior match your actions?
- Do you lead in your community, your nation and the world as well as in your business?

“Just about everything in large-scale organizations seems to militate against leadership.” [ – John W. Gardner]

**These experts have written about new leadership paradigms:**

- **Marshall Sashkin** – Visionary leaders develop an operating philosophy to turn their ideas into sustainable realities. They honor their visions in their daily actions.
- **John P. Kotter** – Businesses should achieve a balance between managers and leaders. Managers cope with baffling situations, while leaders cope with baffling change.
- **Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson** – Great leaders are great communicators. They know how to inspire others through their words and deeds. Their self-presentations reflect positively on their organizations.
- **Max De Pree** – Leadership is not about title, status or rank. It’s not about your stand on this issue or that. Rather, it’s about “how you stand.” That is, it’s about integrity, accountability and hard work.
- **Roger B. Smith** – Leadership in business is the ability to make wise trade-offs. Meeting short-term investor demands is not enough. Direct your company so it can operate in a competitive marketplace and meet its long-term goals. Business goals often conflict. Finding the right balance is the essence of leadership.

## About the Author

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