

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Classic Book Notes #14

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On Leadership Part One

Editor's note: As the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy and Raimy Fellows embark on their 2023 program, we are reprising three classic Book Notes on leadership over the next three weeks by Dr. Andrew Roth.

*"You were right, and I was wrong."
-Abraham Lincoln*

On July 13, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to a Union General he had not previously met to express his "grateful acknowledgment for the almost inestimable service you have done the country." He noted that he had disagreed with the General's tactics, for he thought the General should have marched south for when "you turned Northward... I feared it was a mistake."

Ulysses S. Grant's victory at Vicksburg turned the tide of war in the Union's favor. A grateful President concluded his letter by saying, "I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong. Yours very truly, A. Lincoln." [1]

It takes a person combining two unlike traits to generously acknowledge another's superior judgment. Those traits are great self-confidence tempered by humility.

Great self-confidence tempered by humility is a combination so rare that, like sightings of the Eastern bluebird, one looks two or three times to ensure it is not an illusion.

Who among our current national leaders possesses such sterling qualities? Like Diogenes, I fear we may search in vain, for leadership is never so conspicuous as by its absence.

In the **Jefferson Educational Society's** recent *[Erie & Crisis: Region Faces Unique Opportunity to Reimagine Itself](#)*, my colleagues and I pointed out the critical role leadership has played in protecting the American people during various periods of pandemic. In 1918-20, during the Spanish Flu pandemic, effective leadership saved lives in St. Louis and Erie, while bungling and ineffective leadership resulted in a massive number of deaths in Philadelphia and elsewhere.

Similarly, during COVID-19, effective leadership in New Zealand, the European Union, and a number of East Asians countries has managed to contain the disease's ravages. Late to the start, as in Great Britain and Italy, followed by bungling misrepresentation, if not flat out malfeasance (certainly misfeasance) in Washington, however, has positioned the United States with both the highest incidence and the highest mortality rate of COVID-19 in the world. More to the point, while many countries are seeing their COVID-19 curves declining, in the United States the virus is on the rise.

What was it Harry Truman said about leadership – “The buck stops here.”?

Then Harry Truman was a leader. One doubts you'd have ever heard him say, “I'm not involved; I'm not responsible.”

Leadership – never valued so much as when conspicuous by its absence.

What's a leader?

It's a deceptively simple question. So simple, in fact, that if one googles the question “What's a leader?” you get 2,850,000,000 “hits” – that's two billion, eight hundred and fifty million!

Which is to say, no one has a clear answer to that teasingly simple question.

Leadership – you know it when you see it. When you don't, you almost instinctively sense its absence. It remains, however, elusively difficult to define.

Another simple google search for “leadership defined” nets 1,330,000,000 or one billion, three hundred and thirty million “hits.” Clearly, this is a topic of some interest.

Peter Drucker famously said, “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” [2] Drucker gets at the core distinction between simply “managing” and “leading.” Managing is important – any organization or group needs someone, maybe several “*someones*,” who know how to get things done.

What do managers do? They plan, organize, and control; given a goal or objective, they decide what needs doing and in what order it needs to be done (they sequence and prioritize); they gather resources and organize them for efficient operation; and they embed check points to provide feedback to ensure that tasks are actually being completed and goals achieved.

Who sets the goals? Who determines objectives? That’s the role of leadership. While many managers are operationally capable, not many are leaders. On the other hand, I have never met an effective leader who is not a capable manager.

So, leaders are competent managers who do something more than simply manage.

What is it that they do? In a widely circulating internet meme that John F. Kennedy may or may not have ever said, he believed leaders were “difference makers.” [3]

Leaders make a difference; how?

In thinking about leadership, teaching leadership, and doing leadership – for over 40 years I have occupied leadership positions ranging from coach to department chair, from program manager to director of operating units, from vice-president of this or that to chief executive officer of two different institutions – I have developed four principles of leadership. They are:

Roth’s Four Cardinal Principles of Leadership

- Nothing happens until someone makes it happen – ***leader know thyself.***
- No one does anything alone – ***it’s all about the team.***
- It’s amazing what you can accomplish ***if you don’t care who gets the credit.***
- Leaders must be ***risk takers*** – must possess ingenuity & openness to new ideas.

So that you don’t have to consume over 40 years learning about leadership, I ask myself: how do leaders do these four things? How does one become a leader? Are leaders born or made? If made, how? Phrased another way, can leadership

be taught? The answer to which is “sorta.” Leadership might not be able to be taught, but it can be coached.

There are many variations on leadership training programs. They range from formal academic, degree-granting programs to months long programs focused on civic engagement, like the [Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy \(JCLA\)](#), to one-off webinars on this or that aspect of leadership, such as leadership webinars on Twitter, to professional development workshops of varying lengths, and content rigor.

Regardless of the format, content varies from, in academic programs what I call, the “sociology of leadership approach” to in the professional development arena, very specific, very precise practical advice, suggesting if you perform certain actions, you will be a leader. The first, the sociology of leadership approach, describes various theories purporting to explain how leaders do what they do. They can be insightful but still leave graduates puzzled at how leaders actually get things done. The very precise professional development programs, while not without merit, often only provide a checklist like review of activities leaders perform without linking them together into a comprehensive view of leadership. They imply that if you only follow this formula, you’ll be a leader.

Maybe, but probably not.

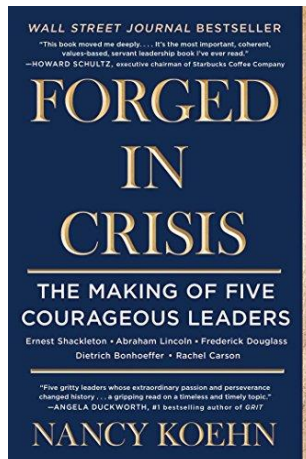
Of the above options, by far the most valuable approach is the months long programs in civic engagement, like the [JCLA](#), which, rooted in the dynamics of local government, industry, and not-for-profit groups, exposes participants to real leaders doing what they do in the crucible of current events and the demands of their institution’s day-by-day activities. Probably the ideal combination would be a rigorous academic program enhanced by a civic engagement program, which is why the [JCLA](#) began its [Raimy Fellows Program](#) to provide a theoretical understanding of leadership.

Still, all these approaches assume leadership can be taught. Although from time-to-time I teach leadership, I am skeptical that it can be taught. Perhaps splitting a very fine hair, I do believe, however, that it can be learned.

How?

Guided – coached – by someone knowledgeable about the “sociology of leadership,” leadership can be learnt by studying the experience of earlier leaders, both their failures and their triumphs. In fact, leadership failures are often more insightful than simply recounting the fables of successful leaders. Why? Because many successful leaders learned how to lead by reflecting upon and learning from their failures.

In short, studying the biographies, stories, and histories of other leaders, both famous and obscure, can shed invaluable light on how to become a leader. And “becoming a leader” is the point, for leadership is not something one **does**. As Warren Bennis has argued, leadership, being a leader, is something one **is**. [4]



In this week’s **Book Notes**, *On Leadership Part One*, we’ll look into Nancy Koehn’s ***Forged in Crisis: The Making of Five Courageous Leaders*** – a book Starbucks Coffee Company founder Howard Schultz called “...the most important, coherent, values-based servant leadership book I’ve ever read.” [5] Next week in **Book Notes**, *On Leadership Part Two*, we’ll examine Elizabeth Samets’ ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***.

Koehn, a historian, teaches at the Harvard Business School. Author of seven books, among which are ***Oprah (Brand) Renew*** (2011), ***Oprah: Leading with Heart*** (2011), ***The Story of American Business: From the Pages of the New York Times*** (2009), and ***The Power of Commerce: Economy and Governance in the First British Empire*** (1994), Koehn is both a scholar of leadership and an executive coach. Her research “focuses on how leaders, past and present, craft lives of purpose, worth, and impact.” [6]

In ***Forged in Crisis***, Koehn studies the lives of Antarctica explorer Ernest Shackleton, President Abraham Lincoln, abolitionist Frederick Douglass, whose “The Composite Nation” speech we explored in an earlier **Book Notes**, (which can be found [here](#)), Nazi-resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and environmentalist Rachel Carson. In telling their stories, Koehn, using her knowledge of business history and leadership theory, draws valuable insights for both practicing and aspiring leaders.

Chief among them is that leaders are *made not born*. A large part of that *making* is that a leader must never stop learning. Like an explorer, leaders need a guiding star, a vision of the future rooted in mission, but they also must be able to pivot to adapt their mission to changing circumstances. Successful leaders care about their people. And, leaders must be risk takers, but more importantly, risk takers who accept the responsibility for the consequences of the risks they run. They understand Truman and know where the buck stops.

Leaders are *made not born*. How? Koehn argues, as I have elsewhere, as Bennis does in ***On Becoming a Leader***, as Chris Lowney does in ***Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 400-Year-Old Company that Changed the World*** [7] leaders fashion themselves by extended exercises in

introspective self-reflection. Koehn says “...all of these leaders were *made*. They were not *born*...(T)he four men and one woman here became effective leaders by dint of working on themselves: intentionally choosing to make something better of who they were, even in the midst of crisis, and never losing sight of the larger dynamic stage on which they found themselves.” [8] Leaders form themselves by constantly, not neurotically, but creatively assaying their experiences, sometimes journaling, other times simply thinking, but always trying “to understand what was happening around them” [9] in order to grow towards their ultimate goal.

This might sound egocentric, but in practice it is quite the opposite. It is not seeking self-justification, but rather understanding and growth. It requires one to confront their failures and disappointments, as well as successes. It requires one to be ruthlessly honest with oneself and not to seek excuses or scapegoats. It requires one to accept responsibility for one’s actions. It is only through such deep-thinking and self-analysis that one can grow. It requires one to be able, like Lincoln and the anecdote with which this **Book Notes** begins, to have the strength to not only recognize, but to say, “You were right, and I was wrong.”

Closely related to this notion of leaders making themselves is the notion that leaders never stop learning. Like Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, although their formal education was sparse, they were acute observers of their surroundings and voracious readers. As Koehn notes, “Douglass’s keen observational skills and subsequent reflection are essential for leaders today.” [10] Whether observing how his enslaver’s, the Auld’s, household, worked, or getting other street boys along the Baltimore Harbor to help him learn to read, or observing the economy of New Bedford, Massachusetts when he first escaped bondage, Douglass was always watching and learning. Equally important, Douglass was always willing to adjust his understanding based on new knowledge, as in the arc of he and Abraham Lincoln’s evolving relationship.

Like Douglass, Lincoln was a voracious reader. His formal schooling ended when he was fifteen, so how did he learn all that he knew? Koehn states “...Lincoln educated himself. He did this in a direct, focused – what today we might call surgical-strike – manner, obtaining resources he needed to learn about a particular subject, absorbing what he discovered, and then honing his new found understanding, first for himself, then in practice.” [11] As Koehn continues, “Whether he was learning grammar to improve his speaking and writing, land surveying to make a living, or legal precedents to train for the Illinois bar, Lincoln was both teacher and student.” [12]

And Lincoln, Douglass, Carson, Bonhoeffer, and Shackleton all understood that the learning never ends. If one wants to succeed, the learning never ends. Later in life, when considering a run for the presidency Lincoln was to make a speech at Cooper Union in New York City. Lincoln opposed slavery and knew his New

York audience would agree, but to make his opposition deeper and stronger, he became a student of slavery's history. He already had a personal revulsion at it, but he needed to ground that in solid legal and philosophical theory. So, he mastered the literature.

The lesson? If one would possess mastery, then the first thing to master is oneself. The first step in that self-mastery is to never stop learning.

I said earlier that leaders are people who make things happen. They do that in a variety of ways, but it begins with articulating a vision of the future, it begins with establishing a mission and then articulating a path to that vision's, to that mission's attainment. It requires focus and commitment. Whether it's Shackleton seeking to be first to cross the Antarctica continent, or Lincoln to preserve the Union, or Douglass to abolish slavery, or Bonhoeffer to build a church of service, or Carson to write about the sea, a leader needs an aspirational mission.

But a leader also needs to be able to pivot, to change course, to establish new goals when circumstances change. As Machiavelli says in Samets' **Leadership**, "*Whoever Desires Constant Success Must Change His Conduct with the Times.*" So, like Shackleton, when your ship is trapped in ice and then sinks, leaving you and your crew isolated on an ice floe 700 miles from port, you pivot and adopt a new mission.

As Koehn comments, "Shackleton jettisoned one objective, to walk across the continent, and embraced another, to save his crew." Or, like Lincoln, if the first goal was to preserve the Union, but that could only be accomplished by abolishing slavery, or if abolishing slavery could only be accomplished by preserving the Union, you pivot and issue the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Or like Bonhoeffer, if building a church rooted in Christian service required opposing the horror of Nazism, then you pivot and become part of the anti-Nazi resistance, even at the cost of your own life. Or like Carson, never particularly mindful of her health, if one needs to risk one's health completing a book exposing environmental degradation from insecticides, then you pivot and complete **Silent Spring** regardless of the personal consequences.

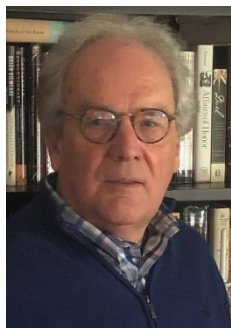
Leaders make things happen by coming to know themselves, by never stopping their self-education, and by adopting an aspirational vision and mission for their organization or team. But how do they build teams? How do they develop a mission/vision? And what does it mean to take intelligent risks? Successful leaders, I often say, are risk takers, but they are not bungee-jumpers. What does that mean?

Next week in **Book Notes On Leadership, Part Two**, we'll answer those questions as we conclude our examination of Nancy Koehn's **Forged in**

Crisis and look into Elizabeth Samets' *Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers*.

But the key, the single most important thing a leader must do is to know themselves. One only does that by a lifelong commitment to learning.

Leader – know thyself!



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End Notes

1. "Abraham Lincoln to Major General Grant", (July 13, 1863) in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. **Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers**. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2015), p. 580.
2. Drucker, Peter. **The Essential Drucker**. (New York: Harper Business, reissued 2008).
3. For a quick history of this famous misquotation of President Kennedy's see "Did JFK Say It?: "One Person Can Make a Difference and Everyone Should Try" at **The JFK Library Archives: An Inside Look** (October 28, 2019) available [here](#) accessed June 23, 2020.
4. For a detailed discussion of this concept, cf. Bennis, Warren. **On Becoming a Leader**.(Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, revised edition 2003).
5. Schultz, Howard. "...promo jacket blurb for Koehn, Nancy. **Forged in Crisis**. (New York: Scribner, paperback edition 2018), front cover.
6. "Biography", at **Nancy Koehn** available [here](#) accessed June 23, 2020.
7. Cf. Lowney, Chris. **Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 400-Year-Old Company that Changed the World**. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009) for a history of Jesuit leadership concepts and practices.
8. Koehn, Nancy. **Forged in Crisis**. (New York: Scribner, paperback edition 2018), p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 436.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

14. Machiavelli, Niccolo. "Whoever Desires Constant Success Must Change His Conduct With the Times," in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. **Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers**. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2015), pp. 127-129.
15. Photo from [here](#)

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