

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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On Leadership: *Part 2*

What is a leader?

What do leaders do?

How do leaders do what they do?

How does one become a leader?

Are leaders born or *made*?

And, perhaps most pressing, since, as David Brooks recently wrote, Americans confront five epic crises at the same time, [1] how do leaders do what they do in times of crisis when circumstances change rapidly, information is only partial or non-existent, and decisions must be made **now**?

Unfortunately, as we discovered last week in **Book Notes** “*On Leadership: Part One*,” which can be found [here](#), there are paradoxically billions of attempts but no easy answers to these questions.

Why?



Because leadership is **not** something one **does**, leadership is something one **is**.

In short, leadership is about **character**.

So, how does one develop the **character of a leader**?

By embarking upon a lifelong journey of self-discovery and learning.

Learning what?

On a mundane level, it is learning the difference between doing a job, managing others who are doing their jobs, and leading both them and oneself.

Actually, having team members competent at their specific tasks is so obviously mission-critical that it almost goes without saying.

Almost.

For there are more than a few ineffective managers and leaders who do not value their people, who see them as mere cogs in a machine. Seeing them only as cogs, seeing them as replaceable cogs, neglecting to see them as valuable *teammates* creates dysfunctional teams. Such would-be leaders have lost their way – maybe never found their way more accurate. They would benefit from knowing how master chef David Pasternack orchestrates his kitchen, [2], what Queequeg knows about mutual dependence, [3] and how Babur understands the moral imperative of caring for his troops. [4]

Similar to Peter Drucker's distinction between managing and leading I mentioned in Part One, John Kotter in a 1990 **Harvard Business Review** article [5] elaborates on managers doing things right and leaders doing the right things. According to Kotter, managers cope with complexity, managers plan and budget, managers organize and staff, and, lastly, managers control and problem-solve. In coping with complexity, it might be more accurate to say managers wrestle with complications. They spend a great deal of their time unsnarling the daily, weekly, quarterly, annual, seemingly perpetual and endless, snaggles snarling their organization's progress.

To that end, managers set goals and targets and allocate resources for their attainment. A large part of which entails organizing and staffing – creating structure and jobs appropriate to the task, staffing those jobs and training for performance. Lastly, in controlling and problem-solving, they monitor results against the plan searching for where adjustment is necessary.

As I remarked in [*On Leadership: Part One*](#) not all managers are leaders, but I have never met an effective leader who was not also an effective manager. So, in addition to all of the things managers do, what else is it that leaders do?

Kotter says leaders cope with change, leaders set direction by envisioning the future, leaders align people in pursuit of that vision, and leaders motivate people to aspire to that vision's attainment. Leaders, then, do four things: 1) they envision the institution's, the community's, future; 2) they articulate that vision and a path/strategy to its attainment; 3) they align their followers by articulating that message in terms of the values of the audience being addressed; and 4) they endlessly repeat the message thereby empowering their followers to participate in its attainment and by celebrating those who move the vision and strategy forward.

How do they do that?

Leaders learn to do that by learning who they are, how the world works, and where they fit within it. They do this in order to effectively align themselves and others to a situation's needs and imperatives. Leaders do this so that they might, with a bit of pluck and luck, succeed in guiding their institution and followers to places the followers did not know existed or did not think they could attain.

That sounds melodramatic, but it is as true for those who lead a small department or office within a larger organization as it is true for those who found a not-for-profit to address a community need; it is as true for those who are small business owners as it is true for those who lead large organizations and institutions; and it is especially true for those who found entire social movements, such as Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi who created "a Black-centered political will and movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter." [6]

But, still, how does one get people to follow them?

Conceptually, it's simple; in practice, it's the work of a lifetime.

In short, we're back where we began. Because leadership is **not** something one **does**, leadership is something one **is**.

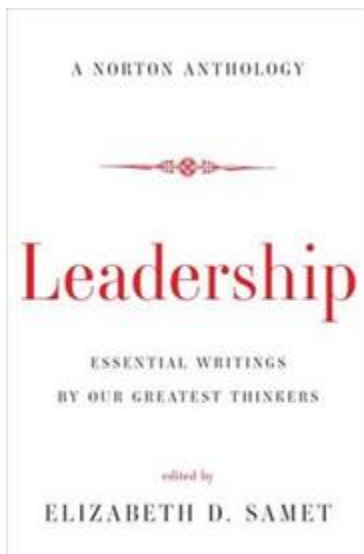
It is a matter of character. How does one develop the *character* of a *leader* others will follow?

Although checklists are valuable tools, the answer, unfortunately, is not a simple checklist of "Do's and Don'ts." One develops the character of a leader by embarking upon a lifelong journey of self-discovery and learning.

Learning what? Two things: learning about the world around you and the world within you. You do the latter by reflecting upon your experience and journaling your insights; you do the former by becoming a student of the world and its people.

You become a student of the world and its people by doing two things. First, by observing and then reflecting upon your observations and experience and 2) by *reading* widely and deeply then reflecting upon what you've read. Your worldly observations, your experience, will inform your *reading*; your *reading*, in a virtuous circle, informs your experience.

Nb. *Reading* here is being used as a synonym not only for reading as commonly understood, but also for *viewing* films, plays, recitations, and dance performances; for *listening* to music – I, for example, do not think one can understand a culture without understanding, or at least attempting to understand, its music – lectures, TED talks, podcasts, and audible books.



So, what to *read*? Quite frankly, I do not have much use for the, if not ocean, then at least great lake of self-help books purporting to teach one how to be a leader. While they can't do much damage and might even help a bit, they are the lean cuisine of leadership literature. Perhaps signaling the leanness of their offerings, no title comes to mind. Better are the academic expositions on leadership such as Peter G. Northouse's ***Leadership: Theory and Practice*** and ***Introduction to Leadership: Concepts and Practices***, the latter a workbook straddling the divide between workshop and classroom. [7]

Best of all, however, is the leadership literature exploring the biographies and autobiographies of effective leaders – some famous, some obscure – and the leadership writing that uses examples from world literature as, for lack of a better phrase, case studies of what and how leaders do what they do. Working the same territory as Joseph Badaracco, Jr.'s ***Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature*** and Sandra Sucher's ***The Moral Leader: Challenges, Tools, and Insights*** [8], Nancy Koehn's ***Forged In Crisis*** and Elizabeth Samet's ***Leadership: Essential Writings By Our Greatest Thinkers*** are the genre's premier contributions. [8]

Last week's ***Book Notes*** explored Koehn's ***Forged in Crisis*** telling the stories of Ernest Shackleton, the great explorer, President Abraham Lincoln, who John Lewis Gaddis called "the greatest President" [9], Frederick Douglass, the most important African-American of the 19th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the anti-Nazi activist and

martyr, and Rachel Carson, the great environmentalist. A video of Nancy Koehn sharing “*Five Leadership Lessons*” from *Forged in Crisis* can be found [here](#).

Just as her title suggests, Elizabeth Samet’s *Leadership: Essential Writings By Our Greatest Thinkers* is a global anthology of writings by some of the world’s greatest thinkers. In some instances directly, in others indirectly, their writings probe the soul of leadership. From Aesop’s *Fables* to FDR’s *First Fireside Chat on Banking*, from Elizabeth I’s *Latin Rebuke to the Polish Ambassador* and Zadie Smith’s *Speaking in Tongues*, from Atul Gawande’s *Personal Best* to Lao She’s *An Old and Established Firm*, from Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, Abolqasem Ferdowsi, Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Grant, Tolstoy, and Alvar Nunez Cabeza De Vaca, Samet explores leadership drawing lessons on how *to become*, on how *to be*, a leader.

In her “*Introduction*,” Samet, a professor of English at West Point, relates an anecdote about being asked to participate in a Leadership professional development session (LPDs) in which officers are asked to reflect on “‘lessons learned’ from their recent combat experience or a group discussion of an assigned book.” [10] The battalion commander who invited her, whom she only identifies as Paul, explains that he uses literature “to build competence for a lifetime of service: ‘I think the most valuable thing I can do is expand an officer’s ability to perceive, appreciate, and solve problems.’” [11]

Unable to predict every contingency one might encounter, beyond the technical skill required for any mission, is the critical need for an attitude of attentiveness and ingenuity necessary to overcome the unexpected. Which suggests, to paraphrase Koehn, that Paul seems to understand what any leader needs to know in building a team – “hire for attitude, train for skill.” [12]

The experience of Paul’s LPD reaffirmed for Samet “...the great value literature offers to anyone serious about the project of taking responsibility for other people and the organizations of which they are a part, about helping them to realize their full potential, about leading them anywhere (sometimes into hazardous places), and about preparing them to endure the aftermath of any trial.” [13] As, for example, from the 16th century Babur’s *The Trek to Kabul*, when lost in a blizzard in the Himalayas seeking sanctuary from the storm, Babur gives a lesson on how to earn loyalty. Finally, having found a cave to shelter his troops, Babur has them enter and build a fire but refuses himself to enter until he is satisfied the cave can accommodate all of the men. If any must sleep in the storm, then sleep in the storm he will, too.

The lesson? Yes, in the short run, a leader can drive people, but if the people sense you don’t care, they’ll be gone at the first opportunity. But if they know you care, people will produce for you far beyond what they at first thought themselves capable.

What are the things a leader must know? Samet organizes her selections around a series of themes: studying the system, emulating heroes, risking revision, knowing the way, cultivating trust, negotiating world and self, taking responsibility, learning from failure, resisting the system, disciplining desire, and, finally, letting go. For each of these, she provides a marvelous selection of *readings*.

Regarding “taking responsibility” and “resisting the system,” in *On Leadership: Part One*, we already looked into Lincoln’s letter of July 13, 1863 to General Grant in which he acknowledged that Grant was right, and he was wrong. Such a gesture earns both the respect and the loyalty of the recipient, for it tells him ‘we are in this together’; it tells him that I have, as the cliché says, ‘your back.’

In “Taking Responsibility,” Samet’s selections range from ***The Gospel According to St. Matthew’s Parable of the Sower*** and *Parable of the Talents* to Homer’s *Hector Returns to Troy* in which Hector explains to Andromache that he must be true to his duty as a citizen and as a soldier even at the cost of his life; the selections continue, among several others, from Mencius’s *The Governor of P’ing Lu, Tyrant Chieh* to Dashiell Hammett’s *If They Hang You*.

The latter is an excerpt from Hammett’s ***The Maltese Falcon*** in which Sam Spade tells Brigid O’Shaughnessy that, yes, he loves her, but he still must turn her into the police for murdering Spade’s partner Miles. Spade enlightens her that there is a code greater than self-interest which, ironically, if one is to be true to one’s self, one must honor above one’s selfish desires. A clip from the classic Humphrey Bogart/Mary Astor film version can be found [here](#).

What is the first thing a leader must do? In “Studying the System,” Samet illuminates a concept from leadership theory known as “going to the balcony.” “Going to the balcony” means learn first to do nothing, step back, and go to the high ground to see who’s who and what’s what. From Bessie Head’s *The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration* to Jane Jacobs’ *Understanding the City* to Thucydides *Pericles Reminds the Athenians Who They Are* to Martin Luther King’s *Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution*, Samet illustrates that before acting, before doing anything, really, a leader must know where she is, she must know what constitutes the culture of the place. She must discover and understand its values, attitudes and beliefs; she must discover who holds influence, who can make things happen and who can stop them. She must study, she must come to know, not only the here and now of a place, but also its history and how it came to be. She must know what it values and what it respects. She must know its codes and its taboos.

Who is your “hero?”

Heroes are dicey things.

Everyone needs a mentor, someone to look up to, to respect, and to emulate. But you need to choose carefully, for not all heroes are worthy of emulation. And, regardless of their worthiness, even the best mentors, the best role models, to use the dry as dust social science term, must eventually be outgrown and put aside if one is to stand erect and walk on one's own.

In "Emulating Heroes," Samet shows the danger of shallow, pop culture "super-heroes" in Cervantes *Tilting at Windmills* from ***Don Quixote***. Carolyn Heilbrun's *Once Upon a Time* examines the difficulty finding heroes to emulate women once had in a male-dominated world. A challenge which remains true today for any minority or marginalized person seeking someone "who looks like them" to model and from whom to learn. To bring that observation home to Erie, Pennsylvania, my friend Fred Rush likes to ask me "In all the banking billboards around town, how many black faces do you see?" One can't emulate what you don't see.

Or, the opposite phenomena in Jorge Luis Borges *The Dead Man* in which the aspirant Otalora fails to sense the deadly grasp of a mentor who will not let go, who will not tolerate ambition. The worst kind of mentors are those that suffocate. At a conference in Los Angeles, once I met a colleague who had a boss fond of saying "We shall have no false Gods before us." He was a great help to my colleague, and in many ways my colleague was in his debt, but unlike Otalora, my colleague got the message. He left.

And Janet Flanner's *Isadora*, about the great modern dancer Isadora Duncan who had no acolytes because she got too far ahead of her time. She scared people. Leaders need followers, but "all her life Isadora had been a practical idealist. She had put into practice certain ideals of art, maternity, and political liberty which people prefer to read as theories on paper." [14] The smartest leaders never get too far ahead of their followers.

We live in volatile times, times demanding change. As Machiavelli says in the first selection in "Risking Revision," *Whoever Desires Constant Success Must Change His Conduct with the Times*. But changing one's conduct requires courage and self-confidence, for it is an admission that your way might not be the best way. One cannot be like the shop owners and clerks in Lao She's *An Old and Established Name* who resist change, cling to their old ways of doing things, and slowly go bankrupt. No, one must have the self-confidence of Atul Gawande, a highly successful surgeon, a group not known for self-effacement, who in *Personal Best* admits there are things he does not know and at which he could be better. Gawande has the self-confidence to hire a coach to help him be the best surgeon he can be.

Or, like John Wooden in Alexander Wolff's *Birth of a Dynasty*. Wooden by the late-1950s, early-1960s was a very successful coach, but he had not quite reached the top of his profession, suffering some painful near misses. Still, despite his success, he had the courage to listen to his assistant, to change his approach to basketball and to reinvent how his team played. The result was the most successful run in NCAA history as Wooden's UCLA Bruins won ten national championships in the next twelve years. At one point they won seven championships in a row, compiling a record of 205-5 during that run. Wooden's autobiography is titled ***They Call Me Coach***, the player of the year award in Division I men's basketball is called the *Wooden Award*, and no one yet has come close to matching that 12-year reign of excellence. All because an already successful coach had the courage to "risk revision" and had the humility to listen to his staff.

It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit!

Next week in *On Leadership Part Three*, we'll continue our examination of Samet's ***Leadership: Essential Writings from Our Greatest Thinkers*** and conclude with a snapshot of my own leadership theory. After all, there are billions and billions, to paraphrase Carl Sagan, and one more can't hurt. Hell, it might even help!

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End Notes

1. Brooks, David, "America Is Facing 5 Epic Crises All at Once", **The New York Times** (June 25, 2020) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/opinion/us-coronavirus-protests.html> accessed June 29, 2020.
2. Singer, Mark, "Gone Fishing", in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), pp. 201-215.
3. Melville, Herman, "The Monkey Rope", in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), pp.31-32.
4. Babur, "The Trek to Kabul" in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), pp. 492-498.
5. Much of the next several paragraphs is a mashup of mine and Kotter's insights. For Kotter undistilled, cf. Kotter, John, "What Leaders Really Do", **Harvard Business Review** (May-June, 1990, No. 3) available at <http://15f6u431ku11j2j642gabgw.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/What-Leaders-Really-Do-John-Kotter.pdf> accessed June 29, 2020.
6. See "About", **Black Lives Matter**, at <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/> accessed June 29, 2020.
7. See Northouse, Peter G. ***Leadership: Theory and Practice*** 8th Ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2019) and ***Introduction to Leadership: Concepts and Practice*** 4th Ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2018).
8. See Badaracco, Joseph. ***Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2006) and Sandra Sucher, ***The Moral Leader: Challenges, Tools, and Insights*** (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).
9. Gaddis, John Lewis. ***On Grand Strategy***. (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 217-253.
10. Samet, Elizabeth, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. xxvii.
11. Ibid.

12. Koehn, Nancy, “*Bring Home the Team Alive: Ernest Shackleton’s Challenge*”, in ***Forged in Crisis: The Making of Five Courageous Leaders***. (New York: Scribner, 2017), p. 32.

13. Samet, p. xxix

14. Flanner, Janet, “Isadora”, in Elizabeth Samets, Ed. ***Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers***. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), p. 104.

Photo from:<https://www.amazon.com/Leadership-Essential-Writings-Greatest-Anthology/dp/0393239691>