

Leadership Literary Notes:

ASCENT OF A LEADER

Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, Ken McElrath
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This is a powerful book about becoming the kind of leader whom others want to follow. The thesis runs as follows: People follow leaders they trust in an atmosphere where they are affirmed, are protected, and have their needs met. People learn to trust leaders of character, those who demonstrate credibility and integrity, who are unselfish and truly care for and serve people. Character develops in leaders who are known deeply and influenced by others in relationship. Such leaders climb the "character ladder" vs. the "capacity ladder" of success.

Chapter one explores the relationship between our inner lives and our influence. Chapter two describes the capacity ladder to success, a short cut that eventually fails. Chapters three and four describe the character ladder, whose rails are environment and relationships. Chapters five through seven describe the rungs, the choices which avoid leadership dysfunctions. Chapters eight and nine describe the pitfalls and the price of the character ladder. Chapters ten and eleven speculate on the destiny of true character leaders and the challenges that ensue. (3)

"Character - the inner world of motives and values that shapes our actions - is the ultimate determiner of the nature of our leadership. It empowers our capacities while keeping them in check. It distinguishes those who steward power well from those who abuse power. Character weaves such values as integrity, honesty, and selfless service into the fabric of our lives, organizations, and cultures." (1-2)

"none of us can avoid leadership altogether. We all influence others. We can't escape it." (10)

"Of all the challenges in life, it is those we discover beneath the surface that will most affect the legacy of our leadership." (12)

More than 70% of leaders do not finish well. They lose their learning posture, stop listening and growing, decline in character, stop living by their convictions, fail to leave behind ultimate contributions, stop walking in an awareness of their influence and destiny, lose their vibrant relationships with God. (study by Dr. Robert Clinton, Fuller, 14)

A leader whose skills outstrip character formation will eventually falter. (Clinton) (14)

Honesty is the most significant characteristic individuals desire in leaders (Kouzes and Posner). (14)

"God uses the totality of our life experiences, both good and bad to mold and shape each of us uniquely toward specific purposes and goals for our lives." Our choices reveal the fabric of our faith and imprint themselves on our influence. (16)

Leadership is a challenging and unpredictable climb. The pressure of success, the temptations of privilege, the demands of followers, and the isolations of leadership make the ladder shaky at the top. (17)

The short ladder to success is based on capacity. The rungs are: Discover what I can do. Develop my capacities. Acquire title or position. Attain individual potential. (18)

If success does not include healthy relationships, honesty, and integrity, leaders may accomplish much but never amount too much! Relational problems often expose character immaturity. The character gap often creates big leaders on short ladders. (20-1)

Question: Who benefits from your success? (24)

One thing of real importance the leader does is create and manage culture. "The ability to initiate and sustain positive cultural changes may prove to be the single greatest need of 21st century organizations." "Positive cultural change means removing the barriers between what is good within our own souls and what is good within the soul of the cultures we live in." (26-7)

In the absence of an atmosphere of grace, people won't reach for their potential. All possibilities entail risk and to take risks, we need to feel a certain degree of safety and security in our environment. (29)

The two rails of the Character Ladder are Environments of Grace and Relationships of Grace. "Developing healthy relationships in an unhealthy environment is nearly impossible." (31) "An environment of grace (a psychologically 'safe' environment) works hand in hand with relationships of grace to create cultures in which trust, creativity, hope, and other positive outcomes emerge." (32)

"Environment includes things like organizational style, sentiments, expectations, and certain artifacts" (like what we hang on the wall or the music we play.) "The environment that we create is something that goes out of us. We are not simply products of our environment. Our environments are also a product of us." (33)

"When leaders create an atmosphere of care and concern, hope and vision flourish." Grace means that we don't just tolerate people unlike us. It means we "extend unmerited favor" to them. We admit our own weaknesses and failures and receive the strengths of others despite their weaknesses. (39)

The Hawthorne experiment demonstrated that "the most significant factor affecting organizational productivity was interpersonal relationships that are developed on the job." (44)

Relationships are time-intensive. When relationships are ignored or used for personal gain and then left behind, leadership tends to turn into personal power over others. (45)

"Every relationship has the potential to provide something we need. And every relationship has a purpose for us - to meet someone else's need. We meet needs in others through expressions of our love. For example, when we listen, we meet someone's need for attention. When we affirm, we meet someone's need for significance. We are fulfilled only when love comes to us in grace, in the context of unmerited favor." (47)

"We experience the deepest fulfillment when we receive attributes of love that meet our needs and then reciprocate, reflecting our concern back onto others according to our calling and gifts." (48)

"The character ladder leads to a relational organization - a community - that honors the completion of tasks. The capacity ladder typically leads to a task-driven organization, at the expense of people." "But leaders on the character ladder treat people as the object and focus of their success." (50)

"Living the truth is more important than living for success." "Character-ladder leaders will protect relationships, even though commitment, patience, and time can be costly." (50) "Fulfillment sprouts from how well we connect with those around us every day." (51)

"If people affirm us for who we are, this ignites a desire to please them." "But if we lack a sense of acceptance, either from God or from others, we become edgy and apprehensive, and we second-guess others." (52)

"Practicing acceptance does not mean we abandon performance standards or accountability in our organizations." "But to maintain a basis for healthy accountability, the organization must also accept its role as a community." (52-3) We need acceptance to be and do our best. (55)

"Another fruit of relationships of grace is honesty. When people experience grace despite their failures, they gain the strength to face the truth without fear. Those who live amid ungracious relationships learn to hide the truth. This is why capacity-ladder leaders tend to focus on the appearance of performance. Mistakes get concealed." (56)

"People who live in this kind of sustaining community have far more fun." "Only the character ladder promotes such a sustaining community."

Question: How much of what you do is truly a reflection of who you are? (59)

Climbing the character ladder begins with an act of trust. Our character, and therefore our influence, flows from the center of our lives, which is made up of our choices of whom, what, when, and where we trust – which defines who we are. "The heart - the inner life, shaped primarily by trust - molds our motives. Our motives establish our values. And our values govern our actions. What we believe about ourselves takes root and is nourished in our hearts. And it's from the heart that our destiny – our ultimate influence and value - flows." (63)

Choosing whom to trust is never simple. Our reasons for trusting can usually be found deep within our own character as well as in the character of those we choose to follow. (65)

The myth of self-sufficiency must end. "We must let our seed of destiny fall to the ground and be buried, because this is the only way it can begin to germinate and grow. We must awaken to our need for God and each other." "But it is our need for God's care and commitment, our need for others' care and commitment, that motivates us to take the first step in climbing the character ladder. Without an awareness of our needs, the step is impossible to take." (68)

"This merging between our plans and God's intentions for our character is the goal of the character ladder." "Our acknowledging God's nature creates genuine humility. When we come face-to-face with the strength of God – not as worthless people but as people who are willing to present all our

strengths, talents, and influence to the strong hands of a loving Creator - we demonstrate our trust in God's nature and authority." "Entrusting ourselves to God is the essence of the biblical understanding of humility. (69-70)

"Humility - recognizing that God is God and we are not - is the only catalyst that can enable our character to germinate properly." "God created us to trust him and to trust others with the deepest parts of our lives. This trust requires humility." (70)

"In a community and environment of grace, we are able to take steps of trust with people very different from ourselves." "when we refuse to turn away people different from ourselves, accepting them for who they are, we will be amazed at how little we have sacrificed and how much we have gained." (71) And it is much easier "when we understand and trust that our destiny rests in God's hands." (72)

"When we entrust ourselves to God in this way, humility creates increasing gratitude and decreasing greed." (72)

"Men of power are feared, but only men of character are trusted." (Arthur Friedman, 73)

"With eyes wide open, take a step of faith, expressing your willingness to trust God and others with you." (73)

Question: Who trusts you?

Most leaders don't know what to do about their isolation. They can't seem to connect in meaningful ways. (75-6)

"To be vulnerable means to come under another's influence." (77) Whom can you approach with the desires of your heart, asking them to provide counsel on whether those desires make sense?
"Sometimes the only way we can see our talents objectively is through the eyes of others." (79) We must trust God and find others who can be trusted implicitly. Find a mentor or an advisory group and meet regularly for mutual vulnerability and support. (81)

"Vulnerability does not mean transparency. Transparency is simply disclosing yourself to others at time and in ways that you choose. Vulnerability means "you choose to let others know you, to have access to your life, to teach you, and to influence you." "In part, this true vulnerability is what the Bible means when it speaks of submission. Submission is a love word, not a control word." "the degree to which we submit to others is the degree to which we will experience their love." (81)

The progression: "Vulnerability causes people to know your life is open to them. You are teachable. You will allow the cracks in your life to be not only seen but also filled as you receive their influence. This process expresses your integrity to others, and it helps sustain your integrity." It is authenticity. (82)

"Integrity is an uncompromising adherence to truth." "Integrity is essential to trust. It elicits trust." "Our integrity is always for the benefit of those we influence. And vulnerability expresses and sustains such integrity." (83)

"Earning the trust of others leads to a natural third result: vulnerability expands influence and productivity." (83)

"The greater the degree of influence, the greater the potential for a leader to lead a lonely and hidden existence, [to be] seduced into hiding the truth about themselves in order to create or maintain an image. People at the top may live lives of pretense and disguise." "But it doesn't have to be this way." (85)

Find two or more people you trust implicitly. Come under their influence in a deep way. Call them and schedule a time to get together and tell them what's in your heart. (89)

"The character ladder is not as concerned with what we do as it is with who we are. Its emphasis is on human 'being' more than human 'doing.' Instead of the What questions, it asks the Why questions." "The true test of character [is] not just coming under others' influence but acting on the wisdom and truth of their counsel. Aligning with truth..." (94)

"The climb up the character ladder is a climb toward interdependence." "It's staying hidden that kills you." (96) "The trust about who we are cannot be wholly known without interaction with others. We all have blind spots that only others can see." (98)

"Ultimately, our standards for character should not come from tests, but rather from God." "When we ask what truth we must align with, we must remember that 'all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments' to love God and love others." "Jesus exhorted, 'DO this and you will live.'" (100)

"When we are left to our own judgment of ourselves, it becomes pretty easy to overlook or excuse misalignments. We may just keep adopting a lower standard for our relationships while giving assent to a higher standard in our minds." (101)

Paying the Price. "we come face to face with daily opportunities to set aside short-ladder payoffs in order to make profound differences in the lives of others. The tension comes in deciding which to choose, especially when some character-ladder choices require capacity-ladder setbacks." (110) Will I use my power to hold on to my position and privileges, to hide or shade the truth, and slowly drift off course? (111)

A restatement of the thesis to this point: "To experience the benefits of love, people must receive love. For love to be received, the receiver must trust the giver of love. To be trusted, the give of love must have integrity. To have integrity, the giver of love must submit to others in vulnerability and align with truth in obedience. At the bottom of all this, givers of love must entrust themselves to God in humility." (113)

"Trusted friends who know us and share our values can help us evaluate the costs of our decisions, reminding us of the goal of our climb." (116) "A crisis often causes people to lose objectivity." (117) "When a leader loses objectivity, it can be quite difficult to distinguish organizational problems from the leader's personal problems." (119)

"When we allow failure to teach us humility, we discover a shortcut back to the road of truth." (119)

Question: What significant challenges are you facing on the character ladder? (122)

"All of us cause ourselves some suffering through our own failures, but it's our response to such failures that proves and develops character." (123) "Suffering and trials can also come from making good choices." People of character often make the right decisions in trials because they place a very high value their influence. "They view character maturity as worth the risks of potential setbacks." (124-5)

"The higher leaders climb, the greater the risks." Sometimes "we may never get back what we give up." But the gold we are really after is the character and influence God intended for us. "Such freedom always comes at a price." (126)

Facing Injustice. "Will I satisfy myself or place the needs of others above my own? Will I trust in my own abilities, or will I trust God's trustworthiness? Will I be driven by circumstances or by conviction? Will I demand immediate gratification or accept delays, perhaps even permanent ones?" (131)

"Paying the price[is] about reaching your destiny by entrusting it to the capable hands of God." (133)

"It's not suffering for suffering's sake but rather the choices we make during our suffering that reveal and nurture our character." (135)

Question: List three to five of your own nonnegotiable values. (136)

All of us long to leave an enduring legacy. (138) Sometime leaders are surprised by a destiny far beyond their expectations. (139)

"When we examine the natural talents of great influencers we often find little that distinguishes them from others. But when we look at their character, we find the essential ingredients of their greatness. They trusted God and others." (146)

Keeping Your Balance and Taking Risks. Everyone has a built-in risk index between 0 (no risk) and 1 (jump out of an airplane with no parachute). Good leaders need a risk index a little north of 0.5. (149) Confront complacency. Avoid over-dependence on patterns of safety and security. Welcome a little discomfort and insecurity. Strive to increase your risk index as you age. (150)

Near the top, leaders serve others on the basis of their compassion and convictions. Leadership becomes stewardship. (151-2) "We must continually seek to find ways to integrate our hearts with our hands, our agenda with our dreams, and our capacities with our character. Otherwise we put our destiny at risk." (153)

Near the top, leaders are sought out by others as mentors. "Change and growth require teachability." (155) "Hear and be heard. Teach and be taught. Remain teachable and teach others along the way." (156) "Leaders who look out for the interests of others stand a much better chance." (159)

"Each life is a work of art, created with living, breathing paints with a will of their own. We actively participate in the process of our own making. We sometimes get glimpses into the Master's purpose

as we see the brush strokes in our lives come together. But from day to day, it can be difficult to make sense of the seeming absurdities of our own foibles and troubles." (168)

"We come into this world with selfish motives. Our motives must change in order to become the kind of person others want to follow. Nobody wants to follow a selfish person." "To be an unselfish servant, we must become something we cannot be by nature. Our very hearts must be changed. This means we must come (or be brought) to the end of our self-sufficiency, our self-devaluation. When we do, we can accept our need of grace. At the end of self-sufficiency, we can find God-sufficiency. At the end of our lonely road of isolation, we can find and take the path to community. Coming to the end of self brings us to reliance upon God, where we gain the motivation we need to climb the character ladder." (171-2)

Climbing the character ladder begins with community. It happens one relationship at a time; therefore it is never beyond your grasp. Find allies who are willing to stand with you, ordinary people who will be willing to tell you the truth and who will also receive truth from you. Hang out with those who are willing to extend unconditional acceptance to you, rooted in their own experience of God's grace. Start small. (175-6)

Community is management practice. You must commit time. Without time, vulnerability becomes very difficult. With time, people can let down their guard, make themselves vulnerable, build trust, and encourage one another on the character ladder. (176-7)

"Each of us must decide whether [we] will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness." (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 179)

"What we do matters less than who we are. How we do things matters less than for whom we do them. As we look back at the work of art called a life, who we became and whom we served will expose our true intent." (180)
