

Leadership Literacy

Let's review seven key themes.



by Barbara Kellerman

WITH THE BEST OF intentions, the leadership industry has fallen short. Despite the burgeoning of business during the last 30 years, the indicators are disheartening. A 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that *only 19 percent of Americans* trust the government (political leaders) to do what is right most of the time (compared to 75 percent in 1964). Harvard's Center for Public Leadership found that 68 percent of us either agree or strongly agree that the U. S. has a leadership crisis. This decline in confidence applies to leaders of all organizations.

And, embers of doubt and discontent are flickering within the LD industry. Increasingly, leadership education has been found wanting by precisely those who have dedicated their professional lives to growing leaders who are as responsible as they are clever and competent. This fault-finding is most obvious among faculty and administrators in schools of business, some of whom openly question the value of what they do. In 2005 Warren Bennis and James O'Toole (Marshall School of Business, USC) argued that the "root cause of today's crisis in management education is that business schools have adopted an inappropriate—and ultimately self-defeating—model of academic excellence." In 2007 Rakesh Khurana (Harvard School of Business) wrote: "Leadership as a body of knowledge remains without either a widely accepted theoretical framework or a cumulative empirical understanding leading to a usable body of knowledge." And in 2010 Blair Sheppard (Duke Fuqua School of Business) admitted that the "financial crisis revealed fault lines that no business school is structured to address . . . When we most need graduates of great character capable of becoming consequential leaders, we often turn out narrow technocrats."

Let's we flagellate ourselves to excess, I hasten to add that the problem of how exactly to develop good leaders goes back thousands of years, to when sages such as Lao Tsu, Confucius, and Plato suggested how to educate for leader-

ship. So, given our discontent and dismay, how can we look anew at what we do and improve performance?

The Leadership Canon

The model that I provide is not forward looking, but backward leaning—a throwback to a time when the liberal arts ruled, classics were king, and reading great books was considered essential to becoming an educated man or woman.

To the question of what should leaders learn, I suggest the immediate import, and enduring value, of acquiring a fixed body of knowledge that's the leadership canon.

I didn't imagine there was a leadership canon until I developed a course at the Harvard Kennedy School titled, *Leadership Literacy*. I came to appreciate the great leadership literature.



I divide this canon into three parts: 1) the literature that is about leadership—work by, for example, Machiavelli, Carlyle, and Freud; 2) the literature that is, of itself, an act of leadership—such as, for instance, Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, Carson's *Silent Spring*, and Singer's *Animal Liberation*; and 3) the great literature to be read or heard generated by leaders—Queen Elizabeth I's "Speech to the Troops at Tilbury," Gandhi's "Conditions for Becoming a Satyagraha," and King's iconic "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

I now extract from the material seven key themes that form an intellectual foundation for leadership. In fact, the depth and breadth of the ideas, the impact of the language, and the trajectory of history that the great leadership literature reflects, make it an essential learning experience for anyone aspiring to lead, or follow, wisely and well.

Theme 1: Importance of instruction. We assume that leadership can be taught, without agreeing exactly how

leadership should be taught, or who should be the leader learner. Differences aside, the great leadership literature has a common thread: the certainty that people can, and sometime do, change. This implies that some of us are ready and able to learn leadership at some point in our lives.

Theme 2: View of human nature. Where you stand depends on where you sit. To opine about leadership is to make certain assumptions about the human condition. Most great leadership theorists had a bleak view of human nature—not necessarily as bleak as Hobbes, who framed life as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Hence, leadership literature, from Locke forward, is filled with ideas on how to constrain those with power and authority. Similarly, from Paine forward, it is filled with ideas on how the powerless might wrest power from the powerful, who, it is presumed, will never surrender power unless pressed by others (generally those below) to do so.

Theme 3: Role of rage and outrage. Both rage and outrage fuel the fire of leadership, on occasion in those on the inside of a prison—such as King and Mandela. Some writer/leaders, such as Rachel Carson, cloak their anger in elegant prose. Others, such as Franz Fanon and Larry Kramer, flaunt their fury in their militant determination to create change, even at great cost.

Theme 4: Attraction of the great man. Notwithstanding the push to be politically correct, the term *great man* lingers still. And, notwithstanding the crisis of leadership, we remain fixated on those at the top. Leaders (however defined) continue to intrigue us, no matter the quality of their performance. They seem to us to explain the course of human affairs, no matter the complexity of the context within which they operate. Arguably, Carlyle was correct to insist that *the hero in history* is all-important, to insist that all history is tantamount to "the history of what man has accomplished."

Theme 5: Rise of the follower. Since the Enlightenment and emergence of modern democracy, the rise of the follower has been everywhere evident. Those without power or position are now seen as political actors in their own right. Since the Holocaust, researchers seek to discover how leaders such as Hitler and Stalin got their followers to do such horrific dirty work. Books such as Stanley Milgram's *Obedience to Authority* (based on the most infamous social science experiment ever), and Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* and Eichmann in Jerusalem, grew out of their

authors' passionate conviction that *followers* are as important to understanding how history happens as are *leaders*.

Theme 6: Growing inclusiveness. To say that the *ancient leadership literature* was by and for *dead white males* is to say the obvious. What is less obvious is that in the distant past, this literature grew to include diverse voices of women and people of color. And, in the recent past, the leadership canon expanded to include voices once mute—the voices of poor people, people who were colonized, gays and lesbians, and even animals, given a voice by Peter Singer, author of the “bible” of the animal rights movement, *Animal Liberation*.

Theme 7: Power of the Big Idea. In his seminal tome, *Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns stressed the impact of *intellectual leaders*. I consider thought leaders to be the *most important*. Is there a greater power than the power of a big idea? Is there a person with greater influence than one who can convey an idea differently? What a genius was Betty Friedan! In *The Feminine Mystique*, she pointed to a problem that had *no name*—thereby inspiring and triggering the modern women’s movement.

Leadership Literature as Literature

Some leadership literature is a revelation to read because of the beauty of the language. Consider the start of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*: “*The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hill-sides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists.*”

Or listen to Lincoln, speaking at Gettysburg: “*But in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.*”

This is great literature! This is great leadership! My claim is not that confronting the classics, *the leadership canon*, will be a transforming experience but that *there is a great leadership literature* and that it provides the most fertile ground in which to grow all leadership learning. **LE**

Barbara Kellerman is the James MacGregor Burns Lecturer in Leadership Center for Public Leadership, Kennedy School, Harvard University, and author of LEADERSHIP: Essential Selections on Power, Authority, and Influence (McGraw-Hill). Call 617-495-7570 or email: barbara_kellerman@harvard.edu.

ACTION: Become more leadership literate.

Poppins Leadership

Just add a spoonful of sugar.



by Erin Schreyer

I RECENTLY ATTENDED THE Broadway tour of Disney’s *Mary Poppins* with my son. We had a wonderful evening. It was creative, colorful, perfectly cast, and well-performed.

In addition to the pure entertainment value, I realized that *there are several valid connections to great leadership!* Of the many lessons, I highlight three:

1. Add a spoonful of sugar. The Banks children are in need of a new nanny. They’ve had several, and yet they’re still demanding, rude, and thoughtless. Other nannies responded to the children with disrespect and disregard. As a result, the children are unhappy—and the nannies soon quit their post.

In a familiar tune, *Mary Poppins* teaches us that “*a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,*” meaning, simply, we don’t need to yell and thoughtlessly demand to get results.

Instead, we can speak with kindness and make the work fun—and achieve the same (or better) result.

Leaders, be aware of your word choices—in *how you speak*, and in *how those words are received*. Your language should be *inspiring and engaging*, bringing your team together to work toward a common goal. By choosing a positive, motivational approach, your team is much more likely to jump on board and contribute their best.

2. Anything can happen if you let it. In working with the children, *Mary* faces an obstacle familiar to leaders: *getting the children to think differently and use their imaginations* in new ways. She reminds them: “*anything can happen if you let it.*”

I reinforced this theme with my son, since often *we are our biggest obstacle!* Our perceptions of what is holding us back are often in our mind. We accept them as true without even trying to test if our perceptions are accurate. And often, they are not. We underestimate the people around us, as well as our own abilities. Or, sadly, we just accept these misperceptions, because it’s easier than trying to test them.



Leaders who recognize a *compelling need for change* need to take the risk to speak up! Begin to make the case; have discussions with your team and your peers; get others on board with you; and start taking action! If you’re seeing something *new*, it could be the exact thing needed to take your team or company to a new level!

With a proactive approach (if you’ll empower yourself or one or more of your employees), you can clearly demonstrate your value as a leader. You can leverage your strengths, as well as the strengths of your team. A fresh, creative approach is often what’s needed to launch a huge success. As Albert Einstein pointed out, “*Insanity is doing the same things over and over, and expecting different results.*”

3. Build your replacement. During her time with the Banks family, *Mary Poppins* does an excellent job of sharing wisdom and encouraging each member of the family to leverage that wisdom in their own roles. In doing so, each gains confidence, shifts perspective, and takes on more responsibility. In essence, *they learn and grow*. In fact, in the end, they decide that they no longer need a nanny to handle the issues that they can solve or tasks that they can now effectively manage on their own.

Like any great leader, *Mary* thought about *succession*. She considered who needed to grow in what areas, and developed traits and skills in them. Then she effectively replaced herself, knowing she must move on—and *they needed to get along without her*.

Carl Rogers noted: ***The most effective leader creates conditions by which he will actually lose his leadership.***

As a leader, your job is to *bring out the best in everyone around you*. It will positively impact the organization and each individual. Look for new ways to challenge your team members and to help them grow and succeed. Discuss their strengths, and how you can most effectively deploy them and stretch them in areas they’ll enjoy most. In time, you’ll have the best succession plan with seamless implementation!

What can you do to insert a little Mary Poppins into your leadership? If you follow her approach, the result could be as she is—***Practically Perfect!*** **LE**

Erin Schreyer is a coach, strengths trainer, and President of Sagestone Partners, a firm specializing in Leadership and Talent Management. Email eschreyer@sagestone-partners.com.

ACTION: Practice Mary Poppins leadership.

Copyright of Leadership Excellence is the property of Executive Excellence Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.