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[Introduction to] The Leader's Companion: Insights on Leadership Through the Ages

J. Thomas Wren

University of Richmond, twren@richmond.edu

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THE
LEADER'S
COMPANION

Insights on Leadership Through the Ages

Edited by

J. THOMAS WREN



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New York

PREFACE

Leadership has become one of the hot topics in the popular consciousness. Bookstores are filled with "how to" books on leadership, and colleges and corporations have discovered that the study of leadership is both popular and potentially quite useful. Unfortunately, leadership remains an ambiguous, amorphous, and frequently misunderstood concept, and is often portrayed in a negative light. Indeed, the well-respected commentator James MacGregor Burns once called leadership "one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth."¹

There is a widespread perception of a lack of leadership in our society, in the face of increasingly challenging problems and needs. Governments at all levels confront increasing demands for services, even as resources to satisfy those demands contract. Political leaders appear to have no plan of action or, worse, waffle as competing constituencies successively claim the leaders' attention. The very complexity of issues such as health care, crime, and the problems of the poor give pause to anyone seeking an effective resolution. Similarly on the international scene perplexing and often dangerous questions constantly arise, while leaders and their constituents flounder in response. In the private sector, corporations seek skilled leaders to guide them in their struggle to adapt to rapidly changing conditions. Unfortunately, in such organizations, "leadership" is often confused with "management," to the detriment of both. Even families seek the reassurance of effective leadership, yet family members do not understand how to realize this objective while maintaining healthy interrelationships.

This desire for effective leadership is hindered by a lack of understanding

about the phenomenon of leadership. When one seeks advice on leadership in the "how to" books of the popular literature, one often finds a distressingly shallow treatment of complex human and organizational interactions. On the other hand, while many evince a lack of understanding about leadership or decry its absence, others are put off by an excessive focus on leadership. They fear a leader's manipulation of others for selfish or evil ends (and they can produce an impressive list of examples from the recent past to buttress their position).

This volume seeks to counter the lack of understanding concerning leadership and misperceptions about its nature through the insights of a number of thoughtful commentators, scholars, and practitioners. Its contents spring from several premises which should be made clear at the outset. The first premise is that leadership is central to the human condition. Leadership is not a "fad," but a concept that is both current and timeless. If leadership is viewed as a process by which groups, organizations, and societies attempt to achieve common goals, it encompasses one of the fundamental currents of the human experience. In one form or another, then, the leadership process has been central to human interaction since the dawn of society. At the same time, the particularly intractable problems facing today's society have generated a seemingly universal call for leadership which gives the topic special currency today.

A corollary to the premise that leadership is a fundamental aspect of the human condition is that its study should be as all-embracing as the human experience itself. Such a broad view of leadership permits our investigation to rise above the current popular literature and seek insights in some of the great thought and literature of the past. Although such writers and philosophers rarely used the term "leadership," it is the leadership process which often engaged their attention. Moreover, alongside the popular literature (albeit less visible), there has grown up in recent decades a substantial body of solid scholarship on leadership which yields real insights. In sum, because the issues relating to leadership cut across all types of human activity and thought, true understanding of such a complex phenomenon requires a broadly conceived approach, which this book seeks to represent.

The second premise of *The Leader's Companion* is that leadership is the province of all, not just a privileged few. This collection of readings does not treat leadership as an elitist undertaking; rather, it is portrayed as a process ubiquitous in its presence and broad in its scope. Leadership in its full compass is neither a position or title nor the actions of an identifiable "leader." It is instead an interactive process in which leaders and followers engage in mu-

tual interaction in a complex environment to achieve mutual goals. Viewed in this light, leadership occurs at all levels of society and engages all humans. A proper approach to leadership must acknowledge all elements of the process, not just the actions of the leader.

The third and most important premise of this book is that it is important to understand leadership. Knowing more about leadership and how the process operates permits one to realize the real end of leadership: the achievement of mutual goals which are intended to enhance one's group, organization, or society. This book assumes that the more that is known and understood about the process of leadership by all who participate in it, the more likely it is that the fruits of the combined efforts of leaders and followers will yield satisfactory results.

The Leader's Companion seeks to fulfill the promise of an approach to leadership which is broadly conceived. It draws from a wide range of sources: observations on leadership by classical writers, seminal articles from major leadership scholars, insights from recent observers which expand the frontiers of our understanding of leadership, and the wisdom of leaders. Moreover, these eclectic readings have been organized into thirteen parts in a purposeful fashion to guide the reader through the complex phenomenon we call leadership. Part I is an introduction designed to orient the reader to some of the issues of leadership and to suggest some profitable ways of thinking about the topic. Part II explores the concept of leadership itself: what the term means, and how one might go about learning more about it. Part III pulls together insights on leadership from classical philosophers, literary greats and practitioners, while Part IV turns to the understanding provided by modern scholars. Parts V through VIII contain some of the best current writing on the essential elements of the leadership process—*i.e.*, the leader, followers, and leadership environment, and how they interact. This part of the book, as others, considers how issues of gender, diversity, and multiculturalism influence leadership. Parts IX and X look at the process itself: how leaders and followers work together to achieve mutual goals. With the understanding gleaned in the previous sections as backdrop, Part XI turns to a consideration of the competencies needed to be effective in the practice of leadership. Part XII adds the insights of several leadership practitioners. Finally, Part XIII seeks to reinforce the desired ends of leadership by focusing on the application of this understanding of leadership to moral means and ends.

Taken together, these selections should enhance the reader's understanding and practice of an enormously important process which lies at the heart of all of our efforts to improve our surroundings, our lives, and our world.

This is not to say that the selections assembled here are the only ones—or even the best choices—to achieve this goal. One of the beauties of exploring leadership is the remarkable richness and diversity of relevant source materials. Nevertheless, this collection is intended as a starting point for those who want to know more about the art and science of leadership.