

# **Leaders Assemble! Leadership in the MCU**

# EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

**Series editor:** Michael Urick

The aim of this series is to examine modern and innovative business theories and methods via relatable popular cultural themes. The books will provide academically rigorous and credible applications and solutions to practitioners and upper level business students, in a format designed to be highly engaging and effective.

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# Leaders Assemble! Leadership in the MCU

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*Gordon dedicates this book to his wife, his sister-in-law who had to watch superhero movies she never wanted to see, and his family of Schmidts, Wiegands, Smiths, and Hartmans. He also specifically dedicates this book to his father, who in buying a box of comic books at the Fireman's Flea Market exposed him to his first Marvel hero comic favorites, Spiderman and the Avengers.*

*Sy dedicates this book to his family: his brother, Sohel, who gave Sy his first comics and a never-ending love of the medium; to his parents Amin and Naziba who kept buying him comics even though they didn't want to; and to his wife, Rownak, who is his forever MCU movie date.*

*We both also dedicate this book to all the writers, artists, creators, and actors who brought us the amazing Marvel Universe in its comic and movie forms.*

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We also want to thank all the people who build that Marvel comic universe. We both grew up reading these comics and enjoy them to this day.

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And thank you to you, the reader, for joining us on this leadership and MCU journey!

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## Chapter 1

# How We See Leadership in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and How We See Leadership in General

### Welcome to This Book

Today, superheroes' movies are perhaps the most popular genre of films, worldwide. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films are the top grossing film franchise of all time (Whitten, 2021), and that number doesn't even include the large number of movies based on Marvel properties that have been released by other studios as well. These Marvel heroes are found across our media landscape, including streaming sites, video games, merchandise, and of course comics! Marvel heroes are ubiquitous in our lives.

This dominance of Marvel properties suggests that heroes and the ideas they represent resonate worldwide. Many of us grew up wanting to be superheroes or at least have a similar positive impact on the world.

While most of us will never engage in fights with supervillains, we all do have a chance to have a positive impact on those around us. One major way of doing so is through leadership, influencing other people and helping them to accomplish important things. By working together, we can accomplish more than what we could accomplish individually, as we see with superhero teams like the Avengers, X-men, and Guardians of the Galaxy.

While we may not be doing the same tasks as our favorite superheroes, there are many examples and lessons we can draw from Marvel films on how to become better leaders. This book is part of the series *Exploring Effective Leadership Practices Through Popular Culture*, which looks to help readers grow as leaders through lessons learned from popular culture. When we first heard about the series we were so excited and knew that we wanted to write about how the MCU can teach us about leadership.

This book will draw on leadership lessons and examples from the films, paired with academic research findings, to help you become a better leader. In this first chapter, we briefly introduce the films, why we think they are relevant to leadership, discuss how we see leadership, give an overview of our chapters, and help you to consider how best to use this book.

## **The Marvelous World of Marvel Movies and Comics**

We think the MCU is particularly relevant for learning about leadership for a few major reasons. The first is that this film franchise is a shared universe of many characters. Characters like Iron Man and Captain America are protagonists of their own films but also come together in other films as members of teams. As protagonists and main characters of their own films, many Marvel characteristics have their own strong personalities and perspectives. So Marvel is made up of heroes with different ideas and perspectives interacting, coming into conflict, and ultimately saving the day. This is a messy world where everyone doesn't agree or get along, which makes it a good fit with how things happen in our real world. Our real world isn't made up of people who all see things the same way and just follow whatever a leader says to do. While the nature of conflict might look different in MCU movies, in our real lives, we all need to work together with people different from us and figure out how we can best work together to accomplish important tasks.

And these different perspectives can actually be a strength, as together we come up with ideas and solutions we wouldn't have on our own. Every Marvel movie is not just one person's vision but a wide range of people working together to make an engaging and enjoyable film. We need the director, actors, writers, special effects artists, and technicians to all work together to make a film happen. Their different skills and perspectives make the movie magic we get to all enjoy.

The comic books these films are based on were also created in this collaborative way, bringing in different perspectives from creators. When many of the major Marvel superheroes were created in the 1960s, Marvel used a unique method for creating the book which ended up being known as the Marvel Method (Daniels, 1991). In the Marvel Method, the writer of a comic comes up first with a relatively brief outline for what will be in the particular comic issue. This will often be the big plot elements of where the story starts and ends but usually doesn't spell out particular lines of dialogue or highly specific visual elements. This brief outline of the story is then given to the artist, who draws a full story out of it (Daniels, 1991). The artist has a major impact on how the story looks but also how the plot proceeds from start to end. What the artist adds can be a major part of the story, with some additions being as significant as characters being added (The hero the Silver Surfer came about due to an addition to the plot outline by artist Jack Kirby! Oakes, 2020). The fully drawn issue is then sent back to the writer who creates dialogue and narration based on what the artist has drawn. The book with dialogue is then passed on to an inker, who helps emphasize or de-emphasize parts of the art, and a letterer does the same for the dialogue. Thus, a Marvel Method comic is truly a deep collaboration between multiple parties to create an engaging story.

The writer and artist work together and bring their different sensibilities to make the story work, with the inker, letterer, and editor bringing their own perspectives and talents. Thus, the MCU is not just the creation of one writer like Stan Lee, Roy Thomas, Chris Claremont, Christopher Priest, or Brian Bendis but a true partnership as well with artists like Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and John

Romita Jr. The MCU films are a testament to creators working together to generate a strong story. As Kevin Feige, the producer and major mastermind of the MCU states “it really is a village to make this film, but they did let me lead” (Aurthur, 2021). A good story requires people working together, influencing each other to shape the story and make it successful. As you will see in the next section on how we see leadership, this influence and collaboration is something that is essential in leadership.

## **How We See Leadership**

Since this is a book about leadership and how you can become a better leader, it is important for you to understand our perspectives, as the authors, on what leadership is. Our definition of leadership draws on the work of Yukl and Gardner (2020) and Katz and Kahn (1978), as we see leadership as a process of influence where a leader influences another person to take action or think in a way that person would not have done so on their own. So leadership is about influencing people, changing their minds, and changing what actions they will take. This means leadership can have a big impact on the world, as things are happening because of that leader’s influence that would not have happened on their own. And leadership is a process that we can get better at! You can become a better leader through experience, reflection, and through learning through books such as this and other works on leadership (Whetten & Cameron, 2020).

It is important to note that we are focusing on leadership as a process, not on a single designated “leader.” When people talk about leaders too often they focus on CEOs or presidents or generals. Leadership is not reserved exclusively for those with fancy titles, all of us can (and do!) engage in leadership. We all influence coworkers or fellow students, friends, family, and others we meet. So while what you learn in this book will help you if you happen to be a CEO, it will still be helpful in any role you have in an organization and in your own daily life.

With our focus on people influencing each other, even without a formal leadership role, the perspective of this book also draws on the ideas of shared leadership. Shared leadership is the idea that there can be an interactive influence process in groups, where members of the group influence each other to help reach group goals (Pearce & Conger, 2003). So rather than one person who always is the leader or “boss,” multiple people lead the group at times, often due to their particular expertise or skill set. We certainly believe in the real world it is rare that a designated leader is doing all of the influencing, rather team members are often influencing each other to help reach the team goal. A good leader may engage in leadership often but will many times be influenced by their followers in what to do. Leadership should go in both directions.

The MCU films show both these concepts. While a team like the Avengers might have somewhat of a boss like Nick Fury (for some of the films) and have people commonly engaging in leadership when the team is on a mission (Captain America and Iron Man), each Avenger has a skill set and expertise that lets them influence the team when it is relevant. For example, if the Avengers are fighting someone from Asgard, like Loki, Thor is often the one with the most knowledge

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in the situation and thus can influence what the group does. If the group is dealing with a tough science-related topic, Bruce Banner will often be looked to for guidance. If a covert operation is needed, the Black Widow will probably lead the discussion, not Thor. Each member leads at times and influences the others based on personal expertise.

Both authors of this book are also Industrial-Organizational Psychologists, so we bring that perspective to all that we do. Industrial-Organizational (I-O) Psychology is a field that applies psychological principles to organizations (Conte & Landy, 2019). We help to make organizational members both more effective in their jobs and more satisfied with what they do. We'll be drawing on relevant theories and research of I-O Psychology in this book, as well work in a whole range of relevant fields like management, leadership, industrial relations, and organizational behavior. Drawing on research will let us give you advice that is supported by evidence, rather than merely our opinions. This will help you to grow as a leader and successful employee. We all can grow and get better in what we do and hope this book helps your own growth.

### **Organization of This Book**

We have organized this book in the way we think generally best helps people to engage in the leadership concepts and examples for their own learning and reflection. However, you are welcome to read this book in whatever way makes the most sense to you. This section will highlight at a general level what each chapter is about. Each chapter focuses on a core leadership concept or two, with generally one MCU or Marvel film focused on. So you learn about the leadership concept through the academic research on the topic and the examples of it found within an MCU film. Table in the Appendix is a handy reference that includes each chapter title, the core leadership concepts, and which films are the foci of discussion.

Our first chapter (you are here!) welcomes readers to this book and discusses how this book is organized. It briefly introduces the MCU films and why we think they are helpful for learning about leadership. We also discuss how the authors see leadership, as a process and shared.

Our second chapter looks at leader transitions, succession planning, and the sources of leaders influence, through looking at Wakanda and Asgard. We then discuss how you might navigate such issues in your own organization.

Our third chapter looks at the ideas of shared leadership and how leaders can emerge using “Guardians of the Galaxy” to illustrate these concepts. We discuss how you might recognize opportunities for shared leadership and leadership emergence in your own contexts.

Our fourth chapter looks at how valuable peer and leader mentorship can be and how shared vision and perspective helps these processes through examples from “Spider-man into the Spider-verse” and other Spider-man films. The potential value of shared vision in mentorship in your own context is discussed.

Our fifth chapter looks at that nature of conflict, how conflict can be good in some circumstances, and the nature of negotiating a decision. “Captain

America: Civil War” and the Avengers films provide examples we can learn from. We then have you reflect on how you can handle conflicts more successfully when you engage in leadership.

Our sixth chapter considers how stress and crisis impact our mental state and our ability to engage in effective leadership through examples found in “Avengers Infinity War” and other films. While we hope none of us have to deal with stress the level of Thanos, we help you draw lessons of pitfalls of the leadership process during stress and how you can best lead in challenging times.

Our seventh chapter looks at how being authentic can help people to be a better leader, but it often requires significant self-awareness, reflection, and personal growth. We follow the path of Tony Star across the Iron Man and Avenger films to show this struggle we can experience as a leader, even with good intentions. We have you reflect on your own authenticity and self-awareness as a leader and how you can grow in both.

Our eighth chapter discusses the important roles leaders play in external relationships with those outside the group, with “Black Panther” and the example of potentially revealing the true Wakanda to the world. You are asked to consider how your own leadership roles involve such external relationships and how those relationships should be managed.

Our ninth chapter highlights how important leaders are in helping followers make sense of their connection with and identity related to an organization. We do this by looking across X-men films and how different leaders define mutants as heroes, X-men, mutants, or even menaces. We discuss how you can impact how others see their place in an organization and the world at large.

Our 10th chapter looks at the importance of female leadership and how women can be relegated to supporting roles in both the MCU and in the real world due to implicit theories of what a leader should look or act like. We caution you to not relegate potentially great female leaders to supporting roles and how you can combat these implicit leadership biases in real-life organizations.

Our 11th chapter focuses on the idea of servant leadership, illustrated in the MCU by Captain America. We talk about how Steve Rogers can be an inspiration and example for you in your own leadership actions and willingness to take ethical stands.

Our 12th chapter focuses on how leaders form teams based on their own goals. Nick Fury, Professor X, and Magneto are looked at as examples of how leaders can go about recruiting and selecting members for their team. You are advised to consider how you should select team members based on your team goals.

Our 13th and last chapter draws ideas and takeaways from across the other chapters to summarize major actions you can take to become a more effective leader in your own life. You should leave this chapter with a clear idea of what to do next to become a better leader.

## **How to Use This Book**

While our general recommendation is for you to read this book straight through, depending on your own experiences and situation it may make sense to do

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otherwise. Here we outline some general recommendations based on your own experiences and role.

The first distinction is how big of a Marvel movie fan you are. If you are a big fan of the MCU films, you may know these movies by heart. For someone like you, you know what happens in the films, but this book helps you see things in a new, leadership-focused light. We would expect that as we talk about leadership concepts, you will start to think about many other examples of a concept within the films. For a big Marvel movie fan, it probably makes sense to read this book in the order of this book as written, but feel free to jump ahead to your favorites as desired. The table in the Appendix can help you to see where particular films are mentioned.

If you are a more casual fan, you may not remember film events as well and may in fact have not seen some of the films we discuss. That is perfectly ok, too! Each chapter will summarize major aspects of the film so you can follow along. The table in the Appendix will help you to know which films are being talked about in which chapters. For the casual fan, there are two ways you can interact with the films and this book. You could read the book chapter first to learn the concepts and then watch the relevant film to see the concepts in action. You could also do the reverse, watch the film and then read the chapter, so when you see the examples mentioned in the chapter, they will be fresh in your mind. Either is a reasonable choice, so you might want to try both ways and see which best helps your learning from this book.

The second distinction is your current relationship with leadership. If you are someone currently in a leadership position (or teaching about leadership), draw on your own experiences as we discuss leadership concepts. You will want to think about how the leadership concepts and examples apply in your own leadership situation. You may also consider how concepts from this book might be worth communicating to your followers, other leaders, or your students/trainees. If you have a current leadership issue (or are teaching a certain topic), feel free to skip ahead to a chapter that seems like it will be helpful.

If you are an aspiring leader or current student, you may not be in a current leadership role, but as we have mentioned before all of us engage in leadership in our everyday lives. So if you consider your own life experiences, you might find you have more leadership experiences than you thought. You may also want to think about leaders you've interacted with in your life and the type of leader you want to be someday. For people in this group, it makes sense to read this book through in the given order, although if you are a student make sure to read this book in the way your instructor tells you!

### **Summary**

In this chapter, we introduced the big picture of this book. We talked about the MCU and how important collaboration was to both the films and the comics source material.

We then discussed how we see leadership and why leadership is important. Leadership is a process of influence and we all engage in leadership in our lives.

Leadership is often shared, with different people acting as the leader in different situations. The MCU and other Marvel films offer many great examples of leadership that we can learn from.

We then talked about the organization of this book overall and gave brief summaries of what to expect in each book chapter.

Finally, we talked about different ways this book could be used depending on your knowledge of the MCU and relationship to leadership.

We want to thank you for picking up this book. As two lifelong Marvel fans, it is a real dream come true to have written this. We hope this book helps your own leadership journey and you enjoy it. Leaders Assemble!

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