

Bend the Knee or Seize the Throne

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Bend the Knee or Seize the Throne: Leadership Lessons from the Seven Kingdoms

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to my family and loved ones who have supported me through thick and thin. I wouldn't be where I am in life today without you. Thank you for being there for me and for being my cheerleaders behind the scenes. And to Spot and Aibi in particular; thank you for watching *Game of Thrones* with me, even though you had no idea what was going on.—NT

I dedicate this book to all my friends who shared in (over)analyzing *Game of Thrones* every time we saw a new episode, especially Jim, Dave, and Nick. Thanks for sharing your time, energy, and happiness with me, not only in watching and/or discussing the show, but in all aspects of our friendship.—MJU

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Professionally, he has served on the Boards of ISM-Pittsburgh (in various roles including President) and the Westmoreland Arts and Heritage Festival (a top-rated community event). He has also served on the Westmoreland Human Resources Association (a regional SHRM chapter) Board in various positions including Vice President. Prior to academia, Urick worked in a variety of roles related to auditing, utilities, environmental issues, and training and development. Through these experiences, Dr. Urick became fascinated with interactions in the workplace and how they might be improved which has influenced his academic career.

For fun, he enjoys music and, since 1998, has been a semi-professional jazz musician and toured through over a dozen US states while releasing multiple recordings with various ensembles.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Bend the Knee or Seize the Throne

Game of Thrones is one of the most-loved television shows in history and remains one of the most-awarded television shows ever. During its eight-season run from 2011 to 2019, it garnered a total of 160 Emmy nominations and 59 Emmy awards (emmys.com), more than any show in the history of television (except for *Saturday Night Live*, which has 338 Emmy awards, but has also been on the air continuously since 1975). In addition to these accolades, it remains one of the most-watched shows not only on HBO where it originally aired, but also in terms of television history. In 2019, over 30% of Americans said they were at least a casual fan of the show (statista.com). According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, the series has been seen by at least 44.2 million viewers (hollywoodreporter.com). This viewership is no small feat when you consider that the show's original run was primarily only available via HBO and not through on-demand streaming or free, publicly broadcast television channels.

Additionally, according to a 2017 survey conducted by *Rotten Tomatoes*, the popular movie and television ratings website, *Game of Thrones* came in at number 1 on its list of the 40 best shows of the last 20 years (rottentomatoes.com). *Rotten Tomatoes* said that the show “took [the] top spot with 11 percent of the vote, while second place [*Breaking Bad*] got 7 percent” (rottentomatoes.com). As another testament to the show's popularity and acclaim, it is also ranked as the number 1 television show of all time by IMDb (imdb.com), another popular movie and television ratings website, as of 2022. As these figures and awards indicate, *Game of Thrones* was, and still is, one of the most-watched and beloved shows in television history, admired by viewers and critics alike.

If you have picked up this book, then you are likely one of the millions of fans of *Game of Thrones*. You are also probably curious about what can be learned about management and leadership through the series and its cast of characters. *Game of Thrones* offers a plethora of examples of what can be achieved when leaders and managers act and lead people appropriately. It also provides numerous examples of how leaders and managers should *not* behave, along with a host of examples of negative consequences associated with poor leadership

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and inadequate management. In many situations, we, as leaders and managers, should “bend the knee” to our subordinates by uplifting them, prioritizing their needs over ours, and giving them control of decisions and resources in order for everyone to be able to achieve or accomplish bigger primary goals or objectives. Other times, it’s necessary for us to “seize the throne” as organizational managers and leaders by taking the reins and controlling our employees’ actions, making decisions for them, and allocating resources to them. But how do leaders know when to bend the knee versus when to seize the throne? In this book, we will explore different aspects of management and leadership and discuss why sometimes bending the knee is the optimal thing to do while other times, seizing the throne is the only option.

For those casual fans of the series who might not be as familiar with the show and its storyline, please be warned that this book contains spoilers. The plot of *Game of Thrones* centers around several groups of characters from the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros who are all fighting to reign from the Iron Throne after the death of King Robert Baratheon. Among them are Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, and Stannis Baratheon, along with numerous others. The ruler of the Seven Kingdoms sits on the Iron Throne, a throne that was, according to Viserys Targaryen, one of the characters in the show, made of the swords of a thousand vanquished enemies, welded together by a fire from the breath of the greatest dragon. Each character vying to sit on the Iron Throne has seemingly compelling arguments as to why they are the rightful ruler of the Seven Kingdoms after King Robert’s death. The cast of characters in the series also includes people who do not want to sit on the Iron Throne themselves but are motivated to take actions on behalf of someone else because they believe in the legitimacy of the claims of that person whom they are helping to ascend to the seat. Without these others, the would-be queens and kings would not necessarily be considered leaders because a leader without followers is just a party of one.

In this book, we will examine numerous characteristics and facets of management and leadership and explore how they are demonstrated and exhibited by various characters in *Game of Thrones*. However, it would be appropriate to first lay some groundwork to explain how leadership is different from management, define what leadership is, and to explore what effective leadership typically entails. First, what is the difference between leadership and management? Often, people refer to “leadership” when they say “management,” as these two words are frequently used interchangeably. Certainly, exercising management involves exhibiting many characteristics associated with leadership. However, leading is different from managing. The role of a manager, or “managing,” commonly entails executing plans (often created by others higher up in the organizational hierarchy), controlling resources (deciding who gets what and how much), and keeping track of people to ensure their actions are appropriate to achieve collective and/or organizational goals. In contrast, leadership includes a set of different actions such as motivating others (as opposed to simply controlling or tracking them), building trust between and among followers/employees through clear communication and ethical behaviors (instead of simply executing plans without

considering people's strengths, weaknesses, personal goals, etc.), and helping others make sense of their environment.

You might be wondering what separates “regular” leadership from effective leadership? If leadership is about motivating others to achieve a common goal, then effective leadership can be thought of as getting others to motivate themselves to reach that goal. It also often entails showing them how they can achieve personal goals while simultaneously working toward the collective goal. Effective leadership essentially takes “regular” leadership and turns up the dial up a notch. Effective leaders work to build, and then work continuously to maintain, their followers' trust, as well as the trust between their followers. It's not enough for them to assume that any trust they build with and among others will sustain itself over time; they know it must be tended to in order to be maintained. Effective leadership also puts followers and their needs front and center. Leadership can get followers on board and have everyone moving in the same direction, but effective leadership considers what those followers need in order for them to achieve their individual maximum potential while optimizing each person's contribution to accomplishing the group's collective goals.

In *Game of Thrones*, Tyrion Lannister, one of the primary characters, once said that any man who needs to say out loud that he is the king, is no king. The same sentiment generally goes for leadership. Leaders should not need to say, “I am the leader” for others to recognize them as the leader. As we will see in this book, leaders are identified through their words and their actions. It is what they say and how they say it, in addition to what they do and how they do it, that differentiates leaders from followers, separates leaders from managers, and distinguishes good leaders from great leaders. The following paragraphs provide an overview of each chapter, and each one identifies a specific characteristic or aspect of leadership explored in that chapter.

In Chapter 2, we will explore different leadership styles and behaviors. We will provide labels and names to identify different styles of leadership, as well as discuss the various characteristics and behaviors each style of leadership entails. We will examine different characters in *Game of Thrones* and explain how they embody different leadership styles. We will also discuss the fact that leadership depends on followers. We will explain why there is no such thing as “one size fits all” leadership and examine why the best type of leadership in any given situation will depend on a number of factors, including the followers and their needs.

Chapter 3 examines power and influence. You have likely experienced power before, especially if you have ever been a manager or a leader, but it's even more likely that you have felt powerless at some point in your life. But have you ever given any thought to where power comes from? Why do some people have power while others do not? How can you gain power? How can you give away power, and why would anyone, let alone a leader, want to do so? This chapter will explore the different bases of power and how power can be used effectively to influence others.

Chapter 4 looks at leader emergence and sustainability. People often debate about whether leaders are made or born, contending that leaders are either born with certain unmalleable characteristics that make them leaders or that they are

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leaders as a result of their environment and experiences. This chapter takes a look at a variety of arguments along with what research has discovered about factors that can predict leader emergence, and factors that can lead to long-term sustainability in leadership positions.

Communication is the focus of Chapter 5. In our organizations, and indeed in our daily lives, we all need to communicate with others. Whether the communication is about a specific task that needs to be completed or about our feelings, opinions, and perceptions, communication is how information is transmitted from one party to another. No matter whether in verbal, written, or any other form, even the clearest of communications can fail when it is traveling from the sender to the receiver(s). In Chapter 5, we will break down what communication is, explore its different parts, explain why it's important in management and leadership, and investigate why and what might happen when communication goes wrong.

Chapter 6 brings ethics to the forefront. As a society, we are increasingly aware of the world around us, and to know better is to do better. As a result, we increasingly expect our leaders and organizations to behave ethically and make ethical decisions. But what is it exactly that we're judging when we evaluate other people (e.g., our managers and leaders) based on ethics? Against what standard(s) are we basing our evaluations? This chapter will explore ethics and why ethics matter to employees and their managers and leaders in organizations.

Because motivating others is one of the hallmarks of leadership, we will discuss motivation in Chapter 7. We know for ourselves what motivation feels like, but as a leader, how can you impart that sensation of drive and determination to others? This chapter will explain where motivation can stem from, what the determinants of motivation are, and how you can develop motivation in others so that they feel just as ambitious and excited as you do to work toward a collective goal.

Chapter 8 is about trust, because trust is imperative if one wants to be a good leader. No matter where you are in an organization, achieving organizational goals will ultimately require you to put your trust in others. Supervisors need to trust that their employees will perform their work duties to the best of their abilities, and employees need to trust that their supervisors have their best interests, along with the best interests of the organization, in mind as they make decisions and execute plans. This chapter explores the bases of trust and why trust matters, along with outcomes of placing (or misplacing) our trust in others.

We examine justice in Chapter 9. When people perceive they are treated fairly, they feel like they're valued, and people who feel valued in organizations tend to go the extra mile in their efforts because they want to give back to the person, group, and/or organization that values them. As inconceivable as it might seem, people still get treated unfairly at work. Chapter 9 explores why fair treatment matters, how justice perceptions are assessed (i.e., what perceptions of justice are based on), and the resulting outcomes associated with both fair and unfair treatment.

One of the important tasks managers and leaders must engage in is negotiation, so we explore this topic in Chapter 10. Although many people think of negotiation as an argument or a battle over limited resources, that is not at all what negotiation is about, nor is that how negotiations should be viewed.

Negotiations are opportunities to create situations in which parties can collaborate to create positive and mutually beneficial outcomes for everyone involved, rather than “fights” or battles where one party is trying to take advantage of another. This chapter will discuss why and how to approach negotiations so that the parties involved in the negotiation all walk away with something of more value than what they walked in with.

Finally, in Chapter 11, the importance of understanding and appreciating different national cultures is examined. With business becoming more and more interconnected around the world, it means organizations and managers need to do more than simply recognizing that cultural differences exist; they must also be sensitive to differences in culture and behave accordingly. Whether an organization wants to expand internationally, build new international partnerships, trade globally to sell products or source the best materials, or hire the best talent from around the world, it is imperative to be knowledgeable about and adaptive to other cultures. Organizational managers and leaders must not only acknowledge that cultural differences exist, but they must also practice cultural sensitivity to ensure that their words and actions (or those of their employees) do not come across as rude, condescending, inconsiderate, or offensive to business partners, job candidates, and other organizational prospects.

Now, before winter arrives and the White Walkers attempt to take control of everything, strap on your armor, ready your house banner, and let's set off for Westeros to learn what the queens, kings, knights, commoners, and even bastards of the Seven Kingdoms can teach us about managing and leadership.

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Chapter 2

Leadership Styles and Behaviors

Throughout *Game of Thrones*, many of the primary characters in the series are fighting to sit on the Iron Throne to rule Westeros. Having a large cast of characters in the series affords us the opportunity to see a wide variety of leadership styles and their effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) in action. For example, the way Daenerys Targaryen demonstrates leadership with the Army of the Unsullied is markedly different from the way Jon Snow shows leadership with the men of the Night's Watch as their 998th Lord Commander. As contextual factors, such as follower readiness, defined as the ability and willingness to take on leaders' initiatives (Blanchard & Hersey, 1996), play an important part in leadership effectiveness, the leadership styles these two characters demonstrate might be different, but each one is successful in motivating followers to pursue their group's collective goals.

Research has identified a myriad of different types of leadership, some of which differ greatly from one another in terms of how they are enacted and their general effectiveness. Leadership types can be examined in at least three different ways: based on the leader's general style when making decisions, the leader's typical behaviors when interacting with followers, and the extent to which the leader engages in behaviors that motivate followers. A leader's decision-making style can range from completely giving away control to retaining full control. The daily behaviors that leaders demonstrate can be classified as being more focused on initiating structure, which prioritizes defining, structuring, and facilitating work, or consideration, which prioritizes respect, recognition, and mutual trust with followers (Fleishman & Peters, 1962). The motivational behaviors leaders can demonstrate typically fall into one of three types: laissez-faire, transactional, or transformational. As we will explore in this chapter, the characters fighting for the Iron Throne embody and demonstrate nearly every different leadership type, with results that range from abject failure to total success.

Decision-making Styles

When faced with making decisions, leaders can head in at least two directions. They can hold tight to their authority and make all decisions on their own without input from anyone, or they can fully relinquish control and allow their followers

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to make the decision they believe would be best for the group, typically within a set of criteria specified by the leader (Vroom & Yetton, 1973). The former is much like seizing the throne while the latter is more like bending the knee. While neither extreme of full control or full delegation is inherently good or bad, the optimal and most appropriate decision-making style for a leader to choose largely depends on the readiness of the followers. When followers are experienced, motivated, and capable of completing tasks on their own, leaders can, and should, bend the knee and allow them to make their own decisions that best serve the group and the group's goal achievement. However, if followers lack experience and/or are unable to execute tasks effectively without supervision (e.g., because of lack of motivation, lack of engagement, lack of commitment, etc.), then the leader should seize the throne and retain control of decision-making instead of giving that power and responsibility to their followers.

Leaders who allow their followers to make their own decisions are said to be demonstrating delegative style (Gebert et al., 2010). The leader simply turns over the decision-making power and responsibility to followers, often after specifying certain parameters that must be met with the decision that is ultimately made. King Robert Baratheon exhibits this type of leadership throughout the first season. As a man who enjoys hunting, Robert often engages in the sport rather than spending time properly ruling his kingdom. He essentially abdicates his duties as king, delegating the decision-making responsibilities to his small council. (Robert's love of hunting ultimately causes his demise after an attack by a wild boar, although other factors such as drinking wine were involved.)

The other end of the spectrum of decision-making control is authoritarian style. Authoritarian style leadership is based on the notion that a leader should retain full decision-making control and makes decisions without seeking counsel from anyone, asking for anyone's input, or acknowledging any feedback (Kanwal et al., 2019). A leader who enacts authoritarian style does what they want, when they want, how they want, and followers are simply expected to carry out the leader's instructions. There are a variety of reasons a leader might engage in authoritarian style leadership. For example, a leader might be a tyrant who wants to maintain power and control at all costs, which drives them to exhibit authoritarian style decision-making. In other instances, the leader may be working with a newly formed team full of inexperienced individuals, whether it is, for example, a new team in a new organization or newly formed team in an existing organization. In cases like this, the leader may want to demonstrate authoritarian style decision-making, because asking for followers' input or delegating any decision-making responsibility to them may prove to be ineffective as the inexperienced individuals likely have neither the knowledge nor the insight to make decisions that will result in optimal results and outcomes.

In the series, Joffrey Baratheon exhibits authoritarian style leadership and quite literally seizes the throne. It is not because he is leading a new kingdom. Rather, Joffrey wants to maintain absolute control. As a new (and young) king, he believes that being the king means that he can do anything he wants and that others need to do whatever he says, no matter what. After assuming power and being coronated following the death of his father, King Robert, toward the end of