

ELEMENTS OF LEADERSHIP

EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

Series editor: Michael J. 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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ELEMENTS OF LEADERSHIP: LESSONS FROM AVATAR THE LAST AIRBENDER

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Gordon dedicates this book to his son, Dimitri, who is certainly interested in all the elements and is sure to master many of them.

Sy dedicates this book to all the future avatars: his son Taimur, his daughter Taliya, and his nieces and nephews: Sara, Daniel, Sophia, Aaya, Eesa, Yunus, Yusra, Yusuf, Saara, Arham, Mabel, and Cyrus. He also dedicates it to the current Avatar (and biggest ATLA fan he knows): Razeeb Hossein.

We both also dedicate this book to all the artists who brought us the amazing worlds of Avatar: The Last Airbender and the Legend of Korra.

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We appreciate all the researchers we cite within this book. Translating this work for the general audience is the goal of this book and we hope we have done justice to it.

We also want to thank all the people who built the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*. These shows are full of leadership examples that we were lucky to use in this book. We can't wait to see what comes next in this universe.

And thanks to you, the reader, for joining us on this journey!

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THE ELEMENTS OF BEING A GREAT AVATAR AND LEADER

WELCOME TO THIS BOOK

Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA) captured the hearts and minds of numerous fans during its initial airing on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008. Since the original show ended, it has steadily gained popularity, with streaming services broadening the audience viewing the animated show (Sáenz, 2021). This increased popularity also extends to the sequel show, *The Legend of Korra*, which originally ran from 2012 to 2014. A live-action series adaption was launched in February 2024 on Netflix. As of the writing of this chapter, a series of new animated films set in the *ATLA* universe has been announced, as well as a *Korra* sequel series, with a growing fanbase excited about the future of the franchise.

The continued popularity of the *ATLA* universe indicates the continued resonance of these characters worldwide. Those who watched the show as children are now working, and many have children of their own (and that very well might be you!). Yet many continue to find lessons in episodes of *The Last Airbender*, its sequel series, and associated comic books and other media.

While your authors were adults when the series first ran, we were both taken with the series and its gripping story. We also saw in it many of the things that interest us now as college professors and have used episodes and examples in our teaching. This includes how people lead, how different people can work together, and the complexities of human psychology. Oh, and it is fun to watch.

While many of us will never be able to bend the elements to our will or become kung fu masters, we all have the opportunity to have a positive impact on others. One way to change the world is through leadership. By finding ways to reach across the aisle and build relationships, we can change the world just as much as Aang or Korra.

Your experiences may not mirror those of the Avatar. We may not be trying to master the elements, but we can try to master the elements of leadership. There are many lessons from both series that can help us illustrate different leadership concepts. This book is a part of Emerald Publishing's Exploring Effective Leadership Practices through Popular Culture series. After we had written a book on the Marvel Cinematic Universe, we were excited to tackle the Avatar pop culture universe. We knew that the Avatar series contained valuable lessons for fans about leadership, both long-run fans and new fans alike.

This book will use examples from episodes of the *ATLA* and *The Legend of Korra* series to illustrate leadership theories. These examples will help you develop your leadership skills and ultimately become a better leader. In this first chapter, we briefly introduce the television series, 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 AMAZING WORLD OF THE AVATAR

The world of *ATLA* is well suited for a discussion of leadership for a few major reasons. The first is that the world of *ATLA* contains many complex characters facing real-life challenges such as war, loss of family, and inter-generational trauma. Characters like Aang, Katara, Toph, Sokka, and Korra all face adult challenges that serve as the basis of compelling storylines for adults and children alike. This is a world where children and adults face real-life challenges head on, and the basis for many conflicts in the series lends themselves to discussions of leadership and leadership challenges. The characters in *ATLA* also face people from a variety of different backgrounds and cultures with their own goals and desires. Much like our real world, we are faced with multicultural challenges with people who have a variety of motivations. The creators of *ATLA* rooted the show's stories in real-life

issues that many people face and that allows the audience to engage with the characters fully.

Every episode of *ATLA* and *The Legend of Korra* presents a challenge that the characters must face. Each challenge echoes something that fans may face in their real lives, and we, as viewers, get to watch our favorite characters deal with these dramatic versions. Whether it is meeting a potential new team member, being presented with a challenging opportunity, or having to negotiate with people of a different background, these are all challenges that we, as audience members, can relate to in each episode of *ATLA*.

The animated series was steered by original creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, who led large-scale teams of writers, animators, and voice actors in the development of the series. In our own work life, we see that we must collaborate and lead others through our day-to-day work, just as the series creators did. The series creators were especially sensitive to cross-cultural issues because they developed specialized martial arts for each of the Four Nations. The Four Nations also exist in a world that's based on the Qing era of China, and the creators had to exhibit sensitivity toward a culture that was not their own as they developed the series. In animation, writers work in collaboration with artists to design and create a world. In the world of *ATLA*, an additional level of collaboration was needed as the creators needed to develop realistic cultures and kung fu fighting styles that reflected each of the Four Nations while attempting to be respectful of their real-world origins. Animation has often helped bridge the gap between cultures, with animators of a variety of different backgrounds working together. We see the same collaboration in the *ATLA* universe.

HOW WE SEE LEADERSHIP

Since this book is about developing your own skills as a leader, it is important that we present our perspective on leadership. We define leadership as “an asymmetric influence process that arises when two or more individuals interact” (Hanges et al., 2016). This essentially means that one party, at least in a particular interaction, influences the other party more. However, leadership is not just designated to those who have formal titles. We believe that leadership is an influence process where the leader can have an influence on

a potential follower, but the follower can also influence the leader at times. Leadership is about influencing others and directing their behavior by changing minds and convincing others. We all engage in leadership in our lives whether in a job, our community, or with our family and friends.

Especially important in this book is the need to understand cross-cultural leadership. How do leaders from different backgrounds, histories, and cultural values communicate and build relationships with one another? We view leadership as a process, not merely a designation that a manager may have. This process is complicated by differing values across cultures. This book will use the cultures of the Four Nations (Earth, Air, Water, and Fire) to illustrate cross-cultural issues that leaders may face. We all influence other people in our daily lives, whether they belong to our culture or not. This book will help you to influence others, whether you are a CEO or a member of a cross-cultural team of colleagues. And the people we interact with are often cross-cultural, with technology like email and the Internet meaning we have work colleagues and friends across the world that are just a message away.

By looking at influence as a core part of leadership, we also look at the role shared leadership may play in the part of many people working today. Many organizations have distributed or shared leadership among teams of individuals distributed across the globe. House et al. (1997) present a critical framework for cross-cultural influence that shows the interaction between leaders' and followers' views of culture. This is especially challenging for leaders who are from one culture and have followers or subordinates from another. You may have the opportunity to work with others of a different cultural background as well as those who are of a similar background. In both situations, you will use your influence skills to make things happen.

In the world of the Avatar, we see ample opportunity for these conversations. Aang and his teammates represent different nations. They travel the world and interact with members of each of the Four Nations. Aang must learn how to not only be the Avatar of the Air Nomads but of all the other nations if he is to accomplish his mission. And people will vary within a nation, too, as seen by different communities such as those in the Earth Nation.

Korra faces similar but different challenges in a more globalized version of the Four Nations, where the nations are more economically and culturally tied to one another. This presents a unique situation where a variety of

leaders are jockeying for power and influence in each series. We see situations where Aang is confused about how he can reach someone like Zuko, whose perspective is so different from his own. Korra faces her own challenges in leadership when she must deal with the alien species of spirits in the spirit world. Each Avatar must lead the world toward greater balance. How they do so provides an exciting framework to discuss leadership theory.

Both authors of this book have a doctorate in Industrial and Organizational (I–O) Psychology and remain connected to that field. It is an important part of who we are and our perspective on leadership. I–O Psychology is a field that applies psychological principles to organizations (Conte & Landy, 2019). So individual psychological processes help us to understand why people act or think in the ways they do. We help to make organizational members both more effective in their jobs (and perform better) and more satisfied with what they do. We’ll be drawing on relevant research not just of I–O Psychology in this book, but also related fields like management, leadership, industrial relations, and organizational behavior. Leadership is a topic that is multi-disciplinary, with many different fields examining its nature (Andenoro & Skendall, 2020). We draw together the most relevant research across fields for this book. By drawing on research, we can give you advice that is supported by evidence, rather than merely our own personal opinions. This will help you to grow as a leader and successful employee as you learn based on the evidence, not just personal anecdotes. Every one of us can improve over time, growing our skills and this book can play a small role in your own growth as a leader.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

We have organized this book so that readers may effectively engage with the leadership concepts presented and reflect on the concepts discussed. You may choose to read the book in the order presented or to choose to read it in the order which most appeals to you.

This section will highlight the major topics of each chapter. Each chapter focuses on a core leadership concept or two, with generally one or more episodes of Avatar or Korra as the focus. Thus, we explain a leadership concept and use the episodes of *ATLA* or *The Legend of Korra (LOK)* as a way of illustrating those concepts. Table AI in the Appendix is a handy reference that includes each

chapter title, the core leadership concepts, and which episodes are the foci of the leadership discussion.

Our first chapter (welcome!) introduces readers to the book and discusses how it is organized. It also introduces some of the concepts of the *ATLA* universe and explains why we believe the series is an effective tool for discussing leadership and helping you on your journey to master the elements of leadership.

Our second chapter describes how balance is important to leadership in terms of how the leader works and how the team works within itself. This chapter uses the concept of balance both within the leader and within the team to illustrate how to manage teams effectively as a leader.

Our third chapter is about leadership ethics. We argue that just because a leader has power doesn't mean that they are above the need for ethical use of that power. We also discuss what aspects of situations can lead us to act unethically. Examples of leaders who are unethical like Fire Lord Ozai are discussed.

Our fourth chapter focuses on cross-cultural leadership, especially among the tribes. We focus on how the Four Nations are more successful when working together rather than competing for resources. We talk about how leaders can better work with other leaders to achieve goals.

Our fifth chapter is about who we perceive to be a leader and implicit theories of leadership. We discuss how often we decide on leaders' roles based on our perceptions of the general nature of leaders. Specifically, we focus on how some organizations undervalue female leadership in general and leadership of women with disabilities in particular. We provide ideas and tips for creating an organization where female leadership can more readily be recognized.

Our sixth chapter is about organizational memory and leadership. We describe how organizations use past events to determine who should be a leader in the present and how to interpret current events. We discuss succession planning and how to identify leadership talent in your organizations.

Our seventh chapter focuses on how leaders can grow. We use the examples of Aang and Korra to describe how a leader can develop over time and how an organization can best facilitate that growth.

Our eighth chapter is focused on the importance of mentorship to leaders. We describe how to select or find a mentor for a leader and the value that mentors can bring to their leaders. We also discuss what makes a

mentor–mentee relationship effective. We focus on the Avatar’s many mentoring relationships and the relationship between Zuko and his Uncle Iroh to illustrate this idea.

Our ninth chapter focuses on leadership’s role in creating an environment of creativity. We use the example of the Earth Kingdom of Omashu to illustrate how a leader can foster creativity among followers and develop creativity in themselves.

Our tenth and final chapter presents a summary of takeaways from the book overall. We look 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 otherwise. Here, we outline some general recommendations based on your own experiences and role.

For a major fan of *ATLA*, you may know the episodes by heart and will only need a slight reminder. For a big fan of *ATLA*, it may be best to read in the order written or jump ahead to your favorite topics. Use the table of episodes to navigate as you feel necessary.

If you are a more casual fan, you may not remember events from the episodes as well and may, in fact, have not seen some of the episodes we discuss. That is perfectly ok when reading the book, too! Each chapter summarizes the relevant information from the episodes discussed. You may choose to rewatch an episode or just go along with the description provided. Table AI in the Appendix will help you to know which episodes are being talked about in which chapters.

For the casual fan, there are two ways you can interact with the films and the book. You could read the book chapter first to learn the concepts and then watch the relevant episode to see the concepts in action. You could also do the reverse, watch the episode, and then read the chapter, so when you see the examples mentioned in the book will be fresh in your memory. Either approach is fine or you may wish to test it out to see which approach works

best for you. As with the characters in *ATLA*, we all have our own preferences and ways we like to do things.

The second distinction is whether you are currently a leader. If you are someone currently in a managerial or leadership position (or teaching about leadership), draw on your own personal experiences as we discuss leadership concepts in each chapter. You will likely also want to consider how the leadership concepts and examples might apply (directly or indirectly) in your own organization. You may also consider how concepts from this book might be worth communicating to your followers or others in the organization. If you have a current leadership-related concern (or are teaching a certain topic), feel free to skip ahead to whatever chapter focuses on that.

If you are not currently a manager or leader but instead are an aspiring leader or current student, you might read the book differently. Do note, however, as we said before, all of us engage in leadership in our everyday lives whether in a formal role or not. Thus, your own life experiences are still very relevant, and you might end up finding you have acted as a leader more than you realized. You can also consider leaders you've had and the type of leader you aspire to be. Aang and Korra are not the same Avatar and you and I might not aspire to be the same kind of leader. For people in this group, it generally makes sense to read the book through in the given order.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we presented an overview of the book and suggested how best to use it to get the most out of the reading experience.

We then discussed how we view leadership as a process and why leadership is important. We also described why the *ATLA* universe was an ideal way to talk about and develop leadership.

Then we ended by talking about how we could best use the book to develop our leadership skills based on your level of knowledge of the *ATLA* universe.

We want to thank you for picking up this book. As two fans of the *ATLA* universe, it has been a true pleasure to have written this. We hope this book helps you on your own leadership journey and that you enjoy it. So now, you begin your journey to master the elements of leadership!