

AGAINST ALL ODDS

EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

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AGAINST ALL ODDS: LEADERSHIP AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE

By

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to all the courageous people who grab leadership
when all odds are against them.

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INTRODUCTION: A GROUP OF WOMEN NEAR THE BORDER

Early in Season 5 of *The Handmaid's Tale* TV series, Moira tells June about a female resistance group at the border between Canada and No Men's Land, a demilitarized space between Canada and Gilead. The women send and receive messages, help others still inside Gilead, and fight the powerful Gilead government with few resources and plenty of courage.

Moira thinks the women are suicidal and their cause is hopeless. "A small group of resistance fighters cannot fight the Gilead government," she reasons. Strong and pragmatic, Moira is ready to fight but willing to step back. June, perhaps fueled by a mother's desperation – her daughter Hannah is still in Gilead – is willing to try the impossible. If there are women at the border, if there is a slight chance she can keep fighting, then she wants to try.

When Moira and June arrive at the border, they meet Lily, the group leader. Lily has a particular reason to be grateful to June. June had negotiated a trade between the all-powerful Commander Fred Waterford, then imprisoned in Canada, and a group of female prisoners in Gilead. Lily was one of the women traded for Waterford. June's determination and negotiation skills saved Lily's life.

As the two women meet, Lily looks at June with admiration. She is amazed at all that June has accomplished, everything June has done for the resistance cause. "How did you manage all that?" Lily asks June. "I was lucky," June answers. Lily smiles. "We use the word lucky when we do something extraordinary," she says.

This book connects *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985) story and characters to the extraordinary things we do to lead in a complex world. It honors those who answer the call to lead without the benefit of authority, resources, or even the ability to mobilize people beyond their immediate circle. This book also recognizes the courageous followers who challenge and support their leaders. It is about fighting impossible fights and succeeding *against all odds*.

A HOPELESS WORLD

As I write this book, the conflict between Israel and Hamas rages on. So far, 1,400 Israelis, 1,400 Palestinians in the West Bank, and 9,227 Palestinians in Gaza have died (Frankel, 2023). We witness 32 serious global conflicts, ranging from inter-country wars to terrorist insurgencies, civil wars, drug wars, and ongoing ethnic violence (Countries Currently at War 2023, 2023). The COVID pandemic has claimed 6,985,278 lives worldwide (WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, 2023). Climate change has significantly impacted weather patterns, causing droughts, cyclones, and heat waves that disproportionately affect those who contribute the least to the problem (Lee et al., 2023). The situation appears hopeless, and we fear for our children's and grandchildren's futures.

Gilead – the fascinating world created by Margaret Atwood in the book *The Handmaid's Tale*, the HULU TV series of the same name, and the sequel book *The Testaments*, also seems hopeless. Our heroes have no official authority and are subjected to severe oppression. The characters experience unspeakable loss and sorrow as the story progresses. And yet, they courageously persist.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

The Handmaid's Tale is set in a dystopian society ruled by an extremist religious sect. The Republic of Gilead has replaced the United States, and the governing party, The Sons of Jacob, controls the country with an iron fist. The new government has also significantly changed the laws and the power structure. The Commanders, a small group of men, concentrate official power, and women are relegated to subordinate roles. Women are prohibited from reading, working outside the home, or holding public office. Aunts, a group of women who supervise and oversee other women, are the only exceptions to this rule. Even the privileged Commanders' Wives must limit their days to housework tasks, leading their servants, and spending their free time gardening or knitting.

One of the most pressing problems the new country must solve is a severe decrease in the number of live births. Due to nuclear wars and ecological disasters, environmental damage became severe enough to cause infertility and

extremely low birth rates. The problem is not limited to Gilead but also occurs in neighboring countries such as Mexico and Canada. As a solution, Gilead forces women into pregnancy. Fertile women who had “sinned” before the Sons of Jacob came to power, for example, those who had been divorced or had abortions, must become Handmaids. Their only function is to procreate.

The new regime does not only control Handmaids, but also punishes or executes homosexuals, abortion doctors, and others deemed inappropriate in their past lives (e.g., high-level professional women and professors). Infertile “sinner” women may either become Marthas (unpaid maids, controlled by the Commanders’ Wives) or be sent to the Colonies – a dreary place where women work to remove radioactive materials from the ground. In these Colonies, women die within a few years.

Atwood’s Gilead and its cast of characters were brought to life in a highly successful six-season HULU series. The series earned (as of 2023) 76 Emmy nominations and 15 Emmy prizes (Awards and Nominations, n.d.). In the 2022 Toronto International Film Festival, we learned that the book *The Testaments*, with events taking place six years after the end of the sixth season, will be featured in a sequel series (Nolfi, 2022).

If you are reading this book, you are probably one of *The Handmaid’s Tale* fans and hope to learn about leadership through Gilead and its citizens. Indeed, the book connects critical leadership theories and practices to the fascinating and terrifying world created by Margaret Atwood. You will learn from Atwood’s heroes, such as June, Moira, and Emily, and its villains, such as Serena Joy Waterford and Aunt Lydia. Each character has a part to play. Each character shares a leadership story.

WAS JUNE THE ONLY LEADER?

You may think this book mostly focuses on *The Handmaid’s Tale* protagonist, June Osborne. Yes, June often grabs leadership reluctantly as she tries to survive and save her family. However, June does not do it alone. In fact, at times, June is not even the key player. June is the perspective we take or the eyes through which the story is told. Countless people, however, played a part in resisting the Gilead oppressive regime. These may be minor characters, people Ms Atwood did not write about, and nameless heroes who fade into the background.

Of course, I cannot write about everyone and will focus on a few key characters. You will read about Emily, who first told June about the resistance organization Mayday. You will learn how June's best friend Moira took over early in the story and was June's rock. Other important characters are Commander Joseph Lawrence, young Esther Keyes, and June's boyfriend, Nick Blaine. A list of characters is available in this book's Appendix.

Was June a leader in *The Handmaid's Tale*? Yes. June shows extraordinary courage, resilience, and grit. She clearly influences and encourages others, and later becomes a resistance symbol. June, however, did not fight Gilead alone. She fought alongside people who probably never saw themselves as leaders. Those people had to save their families and themselves, acting out of necessity or survival. They seized the moment and discovered their power.

In addition, not only leaders matter. As Kellerman (2004) explains, "Leaders cannot lead unless followers follow, passively or actively" (p. xiv). While active followers support or challenge the leader, passive followers go along, either silently agreeing with what the leader is doing or condoning it out of fear or self-interest. Either way, the role of the followers cannot be ignored. Without followership, key leaders in the Sons of Jacob party would not have taken over the government. Without followership, June would not have been a leader or even survived.

In other words, June took the spotlight, but plenty was happening in the background. The Mayday resistance movement had started before June knew of its existence. A Martha network involved previous scientists, professors, and engineers. Ordinary citizens had become resistors on the West Coast, Michigan, and Illinois. We may not hear these characters' stories – Marthas, Wives, double agents hidden in the government ranks, or everyday citizens in Gilead or Canada. However, they count. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, no character, no matter how charismatic or influential, could solve the Gilead problem. June had help.

DO WE LIVE IN A DYSTOPIAN WORLD?

You may wonder what *The Handmaid's Tale* has to do with you and your ordinary life. After all, you do not live in Gilead. You do not live in a dystopian world – or do you?

In an interview at the University of Toronto (Margaret Atwood on the Real-Life Events That Inspired *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, 2019), Margaret Atwood explained that reality shaped her portrait of Gilead. For example, events from the terrifying regime of Ceausescu in Romania inspired Atwood to create a world in which women were forced to procreate. Ceausescu's dictatorial regime prevented women from exercising their own choices in childbearing. The results were dire, causing extremely high maternal mortality (Hord et al., 1991). Ceausescu's regime, however, is hardly the only example of real-life Gilead horrors.

1. In modern-day Afghanistan, women are prevented from political participation, and girls cannot study past sixth grade. Women must cover their faces publicly and are urged to stay home (In Focus: Women in Afghanistan One Year After the Taliban Takeover, 2022).
2. Saudi Arabia still does not allow women to make basic decisions like marrying or starting certain businesses (What Women Can and Can't Do in Saudi Arabia, 2021).
3. Child marriage is still prevalent in today's international scenario. Over 40,000 children (ages 15–19) are currently married. Save the Children estimates that by 2030, over 150 million girls will be married. Seventeen million girls become mothers yearly (Child Marriage: The Devastating End of Childhood, n.d.).
4. Female genital mutilation is still a common practice in many parts of the world. According to the World Health Organization (2023), over 200 million women have been mutilated around the world.
5. Honor killings are the murders of women and girls, typically perpetrated by male relatives (Barmaki, 2019). The United Nations reported 47,000 honor killings in 2021 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021).
6. Same-sex relations between consenting adults are illegal in at least 67 countries worldwide (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). The punishment ranges from prison sentences to corporal punishment and even death.

Maybe you think those terrible events only occur in faraway countries and do not affect you. Extreme laws and practices may neither be sanctioned by your government nor condoned by local culture. Maybe you are lucky

enough to live in a democratic state, where you may share your thoughts freely and where I can author this book. However, the seeds of extremism and discrimination could be in place even in your backyard. For example, in the United States, the Supreme Court has reversed an earlier decision on the landmark case *Roe v. Wade*, thus severely restricting abortion rights. In December 2022, US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas suggested that the court should reconsider protections for contraceptive rights and gay marriage (Durkee, 2022). In 2023, the American Civil Rights Union (ACLU) tracked 469 anti-LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) bills introduced in various state legislatures.

The dystopian stories in movies could happen right before our eyes. Look for the dire poverty depicted in *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2011) in Appalachia, the United States, or slums worldwide. We do not have the Zombie Apocalypse from *The Last of Us* (Hoar, 2022). In its place, we have the COVID-19 pandemic, and even more dangerous viruses lie in wait.

Our world may be dystopian after all. Maybe we get used to injustice and oppression. We try to ignore it and keep on living.

LEARNING THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

Readers may wonder why we combine popular culture books and movies with leadership theories. As a professor of leadership, I can offer the following benefits to integrating popular culture and learning:

The fun factor. Learning does not need to be fun. Making learning fun matters, however, if for no other reason than encouraging the learner to keep going. Enjoyability enhances motivation, especially when the learner faces a barrier (Francis, 2013). For instance, one is more likely to read an interesting book than a dull one!

Common ground. Learning is a social experiment. We often learn as we interact with others and discuss what we are learning. Discussions bring multiple benefits, including addressing different points of view, fostering courage in expressing positions, and integrating disciplines (Ying, 2020). A common ground, a central experience everyone can relate to, is beneficial when discussing leadership. The “popular” aspect of popular culture increases the likelihood that people will share common examples and find it easier to connect to fellow learners.

What will you remember? The brain must process 70,000 thoughts daily (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Popular culture makes learning memorable by connecting something we have seen with something we are now learning. These connections are critical components of the learning experience (Brown et al., 2014).

Out-of-body experience. We may refuse to accept something that threatens us. For example, if we immediately apply a leadership concept to our real lives, we may feel unsafe and, thus, discount the lesson learned. When someone else makes a mistake in a popular culture book, movie, or TV series, we are less likely to activate our normal ego protections. We can, instead, observe what worked and did not work. Then, after a productive incubation period, we can connect what we learned through popular culture to our actual experiences.

We are already learning. Urick (2021) explains that learning through popular culture is already occurring. We laugh at Michael Gary Scott's shenanigans in *The Office* (Daniels et al., 2005) and marvel at the nobility of Ned Stark in *The Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011). We learn not to lead by watching Robert Baratheon's disastrous performance in *The Game of Thrones* or Miranda Priestly's self-centeredness in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel, 2006). On the other hand, we may instinctively want to follow strong leaders such as President Jeb Bartlett in *The West Wing* (Schlamme, 1999) or Ted Lasso in the Apple TV series of the same name (Hunt et al., 2020). Thus, using pop culture to learn leadership means dissecting our discoveries and taking them a step further.

In summary, the beauty of learning leadership through pop culture is that we escape reality and dive into a fictional world. In that imaginary world, we can see things we may not notice if we stand too close. Leadership lessons become apparent as the characters in the film or TV show do not bother us at work and do not have power over us. We watch, in a voyeuristic style, as actors behave as bad leaders and followers. We witness disasters unfolding, fascinated. We may even see things the writers did not think about as the characters take on a life of their own. And then, our brains nimbly connect what we see to our real lives.

I have introduced students to change, diversity, and social equality topics using pop culture. For example, *The Hunger Games* series, based on Suzanne Collins' (2011) well-known trilogy, provides intriguing social equality scenarios. *The Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011) is a terrific conduit for

studying ethics. We can also go beyond films and TV series and explore modern problems using games such as Monopoly, Apples to Apples, or Pictionary. Even simple Lego® pieces allow us to role-play fascinating adventures or share powerful insights (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014).

TV series and books are particularly rich in helping us understand leadership. They are longer and allow more time to address societal woes. We meet the characters over time and thus learn more about their personalities and values. Each episode gives us further food for thought and opportunities to apply the lessons learned.

YES, YOU CAN BE A LEADER

Perhaps you think you cannot be a leader. Maybe you were not the charismatic and exciting kid in middle school or the classmate who became class president in the sixth grade. Maybe you do not have a managerial position and were never chosen for your organization's high-potential team. Perhaps you picked this book not because you think of yourself as a leader but because you enjoyed *The Handmaid's Tale* book or TV series and want to learn more.

A central thesis in this book, however, is that leadership does not belong to a select few. We all have the responsibility to grab leadership. We are all important and needed.

You must lead because the charismatic kid you remember from sixth grade cannot solve our world's problems. Additionally, as this list of charismatic leaders shows – Kusno Sukarno, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Jim Jones, and Fidel Castro – not all charismatic people possess the moral integrity necessary to lead. Charisma may help influence others or bring a group together. Charisma, however, is neither sufficient nor necessary for leadership effectiveness.

You must lead because we face, as a human race, complex and persistent problems such as poverty, hunger, terrorism, violence, and climate change. You must lead because we are plagued by moral blindness, jealousy, and refusal to adapt to new conditions. You must lead because, like all of us, you are responsible for our mess. You must lead because you could, one day, face incompetent, unethical, or even evil leaders (Kellerman, 2004). And finally, you must lead because you do not want your children and grandchildren to inherit Gilead.