

SWIFT LEADERSHIP

EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

Series editor: Michael J. Urick

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SWIFT LEADERSHIP

A Taylor-made Approach to
Influence and Decision Making

By

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2025

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83549-623-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-620-6 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-622-0 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I would like to dedicate this book to my husband, Adam, and our son, Silas. I love you both dearly. Thank you for your unwavering support and for joining me on this adventure. I also appreciate your tolerance of the constant Taylor Swift music playing throughout our home. – Mariah Yates

This book is dedicated to the students of the Alex G. McKenna School of Business, Economics, and Government at Saint Vincent College.

You constantly inspire me to be the best I can be. Many of you expressed excitement (and provided ideas) when I talked with you about the possibility of this book. Thank you for your enthusiasm – you make my job worthwhile. – Michael J. Urick

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

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to my husband, Adam, and our son, Silas. Your all's willingness to be flexible in allowing me to lock myself away in the office to write, coupled with your continuous support and encouragement, are what made this book possible.

I extend my profound thanks to my coauthor, Mike Urick, for inviting me to join this exciting project and giving me the opportunity to write my first book. Your guidance and partnership have been invaluable.

To the amazing team at Emerald – Fiona Allison, Lydia Cutmore, Joshi Monica Jerome, Yemaya Marsden, and Sangeetha Rajan – thank you for your assistance and for believing in me as a writer. Your support has been instrumental in bringing this book to life.

I am also deeply grateful to Taylor Swift for inspiring me and so many others to embrace our own authentic forms of leadership. Your journey has provided a rich source of insights and motivation.

To my fellow Swifties, thank you for your extensive research materials and for being one of the most welcoming and encouraging fandoms out there. Your passion and dedication have enriched this project in countless ways.

Lastly, I want to thank you, the reader, for picking up this book. Your interest and engagement are what make this work meaningful. I hope you find inspiration and valuable insights within these pages.

– Mariah Yates

There are many people that I would like to thank, without whom this book would not be possible.

First, I would like to thank Janet and Lucy. Thank you for putting up with my crazy schedule, multitasking, and taking on too many projects than I can actually handle. Thank you also for understanding my more frequent listening to Taylor Swift while coauthoring this book than I had in the past.

Thank you to my parents, Richard and Michele. Along with my grandfather, Michael “Ug” Cilli, you fostered in me a love of music and writing from a very young age.

Thank you to lead author Mariah Yates. I appreciate our working together and your dedication to seeing this project through.

We could not have completed this book without the assistance of Fiona Allison, Lydia Cutmore, Hemavathi Rajendran, Aimee Wright, Madison Klopfer, Joshi Monica Jerome, Sangeetha Rajan, and all the crew at Emerald. You are all amazing. Thank you for all that you did to get this book published and all that you do for the success of the book series.

Thank you to my students, to whom this book is dedicated, for keeping me young and for making my day job as dean worthwhile.

I’d like to thank my assistant, Lana Dillon, for helping me to find free time in my hectic schedule to devote to fun projects like this.

Thank you to Mark Kachmar for challenging my belief that Taylor Swift is a skilled leader. Because of our conversations, you have made my beliefs that Taylor Swift is a leader worthy of study stronger and, in turn, my arguments for studying leadership through her more pronounced.

Of course, this book would not be possible without Taylor Swift and the team that allows her to write and perform music. Thank you for providing the soundtrack of a generation and for giving us a book’s worth of thoughts to consider when exploring leadership.

I also thank God for blessing me with the joy of and ability to write this book and to enjoy both music and studying leadership.

Lastly, thank you, the reader, for picking up a copy of this book. I hope you find it both useful and interesting.

– Michael J. Urick

...READY FOR IT?¹

ABSTRACT

This chapter is an introduction to the book “Swift Leadership: A Taylor-made Approach to Influence and Decision Making” which is part of the “Exploring Effective Leadership Practices Through Popular Culture” series. The book explores the business practices, decisions, and influence tactics used by popular musician and icon Taylor Swift. Swift leverages her popularity to stand up to entertainment industry giants and champion the underdog. This first chapter provides an overview of the book and reasons why analyzing Swift’s leadership approach is helpful.

Keywords: Influence tactics; decisions; introduction; popular culture; Taylor Swift leadership

INTRODUCTION

Taylor Swift was born in December 1989 in a small town in Pennsylvania (USA), and over the next 35 years, would rise to arguably become one of the most popular and influential performers of all time. But this book is not a biography of Swift; rather, it is an examination of what has made her successful as a leader.

¹Swift, T. (2017). ...Ready for It? [Song]. On *Reputation*. Big Machine Records.

When discussing about writing this book with a colleague, one of its authors was confronted with the statement that Taylor Swift was not truly a leader. After all, she (at the time of writing this book) was not an elected official, did not hold an executive position in a Fortune 500 organization, nor commanded a large organization from the top of its hierarchy. However, our view is that Swift is a leader nonetheless.

While we conclude this chapter with a few reasons why it makes sense to think about leadership, using examples from Swift's life and her songs, it suffices to say that we believe her to be a leader based on our working definition of "leadership." We believe that leadership is an activity in which a person influences others while resisting unwanted influence in return (Daft, 2014). Furthermore, leadership requires an individual to make decisions (Vroom & Yetton, 1973).

Swift is both an influencer and decision-maker and, therefore, a leader. She influences millions of fans worldwide as a role model, influencing them to purchase her music and shell out sizable amounts of money to attend her concerts. She makes many decisions as she is the CEO of her brand. It should be noted that many of these decisions benefit others, even just by bringing personal enjoyment from her music. In contrast, some of her decisions have sent significant shockwaves through the industries she is a part of – more on how her decisions have made an impact later.

An astute reader may ask, what is the purpose of exploring Taylor Swift and her leadership? Our purpose is consistent with other books in this "Exploring Effective Leadership Practices through Popular Culture" series. Using fun and engaging examples of popular culture (such as Taylor Swift) can clarify leadership ideas and theories for readers (Urlick, 2021). Readers will be presented with academically supported leadership theories, concepts, and techniques, followed by examples from Swift's own leadership approach to make them clearer. We hope readers will then learn these theories, concepts, and techniques to reflect on their leadership style and see how they might be adopted.

That is not to say that readers should do exactly what Taylor Swift does. That would be a mistake because every leader's context is unique and different in some way (Oc, 2018). Very few of us will be international multimedia superstars in the same way that Swift is. So, it does not make sense to do EXACTLY what Swift does. Instead, we should look at what worked for Swift, understand the theory behind why it worked (or did not work) for her, and then determine if there is a way we can leverage that understanding to adapt it to fit our context.

This chapter is an introduction to the book. We hope to make leadership concepts clearer to readers by illustrating them through examples from Taylor Swift. This chapter will now present an overview of what readers might expect from this book, followed by our elaboration on why we think focusing on Swift to learn about leadership is useful.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Before getting too far ahead with describing why we think examining Taylor Swift's leadership is valid, it may first be interesting to the reader to get a sense of what this book will cover. This section provides a preview of each of the upcoming chapters, named for some of Swift's songs that are most relevant to the chapter's topic.

The first chapter, titled "...Ready for It?," provides a brief overview of the book. We suggest why examining Swift's approach to leadership is useful by highlighting many of her records and suggesting how she fought against some major music industry institutions. Swift often champions the underdog and, in doing so, exerts influence and makes decisions, which are two hallmarks of leaders, thus making her a valuable and exciting example to consider.

In the second chapter of "Wildest Dreams,²" we consider the concept of visionary leadership, in which a goal can be a driving, influential force. We consider goal-setting theory and explore how it relates to Swift's early career dream of recording in Nashville. We then discuss the importance of pursuing a vision once it is set and consider that it should align with the knowledge, skills, and abilities of oneself or those that a leader hopes to influence.

The third chapter, "Fearless,³" explores transformational leadership and suggests that Swift engages in inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Many specific examples from Swift's career will illustrate these "Four I's" of transformational leadership.

²Swift, T. (2021). Wildest Dreams [Song]. *On Wildest Dreams* (Taylor's Version). Republic Records.

³Swift, T. (2021). Fearless [Song]. *On Fearless* (Taylor's Version). Republic Records.

“Sparks Fly”⁴ is the fourth chapter of the book. In this chapter, we define creativity and innovation and suggest how they can be drivers for success. We then consider how different leadership styles relate to creativity and innovation and suggest that, through authentic leadership, Swift has become influential and inspired creativity among her followers. Likewise, by taking an entrepreneurial approach to leadership, Swift was able to take more charge of her career and trajectory as an artist, thereby maximizing her creativity.

The fifth chapter, “Enchanted,”⁵ considers how leaders become influential by possessing power. This chapter considers the five classic bases of power: legitimate, reward, coercive, expert, and referent. We provide clear evidence of how Taylor Swift leveraged each of the bases to become an influential leader.

“Speak Now,”⁶ the sixth chapter of the book, describes Swift’s ability to leverage her influence to make important decisions and to advocate for what she cares about. This chapter considers Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and suggests that Swift is influential with her in-group (her super fans often known as Swifties). But she also impacts other groups, including those who are only casual fans who are familiar with Swift’s biggest hits and even individuals who dislike the singer and are decidedly anti-Swift. This chapter also explores Servant Leadership and provides examples of how Swift uses her influence to impact broad social issues (Greenleaf, 1977).

In “The Story of Us,”⁷ the book’s seventh chapter, we consider teams. Swift has done a considerable job of putting together a group of people to provide advice, support, resources, and essential functions for her product. We examine how she did this by considering social capital theory and explaining Swift’s approach to building and leveraging professional relationships. We then consider what makes groups effective and suggest that Swift surrounds herself with people who exhibit team characteristics, are guided by a compelling direction, are enabled by a clear structure, are supported and supportive, and experience coaching.

The eighth chapter considers crisis and unpredictability. Its title is “Out of the Woods,”⁸ which reflects some of the crises that Swift faced and how

⁴Swift, T. (2023). Sparks Fly [Song]. *On Speak Now* (Taylor’s Version). Republic Records.

⁵Swift, T. (2023). Enchanted [Song]. *On Speak Now* (Taylor’s Version). Republic Records.

⁶Swift, T. (2023). Speak Now [Song]. *On Speak Now* (Taylor’s Version). Republic Records.

⁷Swift, T. (2023). The Story of Us [Song]. *On Speak Now* (Taylor’s Version). Republic Records.

⁸Swift, T. (2021). Out of the Woods [Song]. *On 1989* (Taylor’s Version). Republic Records.

she responded to them, including her decision to re-record her entire music catalog when faced with losing ownership of her albums. In this chapter, we explore the five phases of crisis management and provide examples of Swift progressing through these stages. We also suggest the importance of maintaining a positive psychological mindset while facing crisis situations by providing examples from Swift's career. In doing so, we consider the importance of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism.

"Anti-Hero"⁹ is the ninth chapter and is a bit more critical of Swift's leadership than prior chapters. It considers some of the pitfalls of idolizing leaders (and celebrities) such as Taylor Swift. Furthermore, it suggests that each leader's context is unique, and thus, it is crucial to consider one's unique situation when trying to emulate the behaviors of other role model leaders. Furthermore, it presents a critique of some potential missteps of Swift's approach to influence and decision-making, including her use of a private jet, involvement with politics, and responsibility as a role model to consider the content of her art.

"All Too Well"¹⁰ is the concluding chapter of the book. In it, we summarize all of the content covered thus far and make suggestions for important takeaways that we hope readers will consider. We also reflect on the leadership lessons that Taylor Swift can teach us.

Throughout the book, we will explore the above in significant detail using examples from Taylor Swift's life and career as appropriate. Hopefully, you now have a sense of the direction of the book and are already starting to believe that Taylor Swift is an appropriate person to consider to learn more about leadership. The following section will further make the case for our rationale in looking at Swift's leadership approach.

WHY FOCUS ON TAYLOR SWIFT

At this point, you may be wondering to yourself: but why Taylor Swift? Aren't there other world leaders to examine who are more impactful to important social phenomena such as global conflict and the economy? Moreover, aren't there other ways to learn about leadership in a fun way other than exploring concepts through the examples of Taylor Swift? Absolutely! However, as we

⁹Swift, T. (2022). Anti-Hero [Song]. On *Midnights*. Republic Records.

¹⁰Swift, T. (2021). All Too Well [Song]. On *Red* (Taylor's Version). Republic Records.

have already stated, leadership concepts can be illustrated effectively through Swift, and in so doing, we aim to reach a broad audience.

Furthermore, in this book, we will explore many examples that make Swift an appropriate figure to explore leadership concepts. This chapter will focus on four specific examples highlighting the appropriateness of studying her leadership.

First is Swift's devotion to her fans. She has a passionate fanbase who speculate on her every next move on social media. Furthermore, her fans are engaged with her every move in significant ways, downloading and streaming every new Swift song released (including exclusive special bonus tracks). They attend concerts sporting Taylor Swift apparel and exchanging bracelets. They do not just show up – they show up in droves. Swift's Eras tour was the highest-grossing tour ever – and her shows also have higher attendance than uber-popular US sporting events such as the Super Bowl (Rosen, 2023). In some cities, crowds at her Eras Tour shows were so large that they caused earthquakes while dancing in the arena to Swift's tunes (Sykes & Rosenbloom, 2023). Her influence was so impactful that some towns gave her the key to the city, named streets in her honor, and (in the case of Glendale, Arizona) renamed their city in honor of Swift (Masley, 2023).

Second, Swift is more than just the biggest ticket for live music. She is the top-selling artist in the world as of writing this in 2024, and she has been in the number one Billboard spot for some time (Billboard, 2024). She is the only solo artist to have five albums, spend at least six weeks at number one on the Billboard charts – and has surpassed even the Beatles' record of most weeks in Billboard's Top 200 songs (Caulfield, 2024). In 2023, Swift had the most number-one Billboard albums of any female artist – an incredible feat for someone only in their mid-thirties (France, 2023).

It is not just because of her popularity that we chose to focus on Taylor Swift. Our third reason is that she is also a game-changer in the industries in which she operates. For example, Swift chose to re-record all of her albums when she was being treated unfairly by her previous record label so that its management would not get a further cent of royalties (Bruner, 2023). This action upended how artists interface with record labels and called into question who should be owners of master recordings and how artists should be treated. Furthermore, though her concert tickets are expensive, she (along with her fans) battled entertainment giant TicketMaster to stop overcharging for tickets, eventually leading to multiple lawsuits and a US Senate inquiry (Mayer, 2022).

Fourth, we want to note some of Swift's positive contributions. While no leader is perfect, including Taylor Swift, she has done a lot of good. In addition to being a positive influence for her many fans, she also donates generously. For example, during a recent tour stop in Pittsburgh, USA, Swift donated an unprecedented amount to a local food bank that resulted in providing thousands of meals across the region for those in need (Hall, 2023). Swift also paid more than \$55 million in bonuses to her tour truck drivers (which they called life-changing) to show her appreciation (Heller, 2023).

For each of these reasons, we see decision-making and the practice of influencing others as the hallmarks of our working definition of leadership. Of course, more examples will be provided throughout the following pages. However, if these are still insufficient, readers may also refer to the late 2023 CNN report that labeled Swift's year the best any business leader had in recent times due to her commercial success and strong business acumen (Mena, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Leaders can come from anywhere. The examples that inspire solid leadership practices in each of us can be found in various places, even in popular culture. This book will explore leadership through examples from music superstar Taylor Swift. As an introduction, this first chapter explored the following:

- There are many definitions of leadership. The one that we choose to focus on in this book is that leadership is a process of influence and requires decision-making. Taylor Swift is an excellent candidate to use to understand leadership phenomena better because she is both influential and makes decisions that impact many others.
- Though more information will be provided throughout, this chapter provides a roadmap to the reader as we begin to consider leadership concepts that can be illustrated through Swift.
- We also considered in some depth reasons why it makes sense to explore leadership via Swift's examples. These reasons included her devotion to fans, record-breaking album and ticket sales, willingness to take on the established status quo, generosity, and being named a successful business leader by CNN.

We are excited to learn more about leadership through Taylor Swift with you throughout the pages of this book.

Each chapter in the book is named after a Taylor Swift song. The next chapter (“Wildest Dreams”) considers pursuing a vision and highlights how Swift’s devotion to her vision – even from a young age – contributed to her success.

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