

Book Review

Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't¹

Reviewed by Major Brent W. Thompson*

[L]eaders are expected to eat last because the true price of leadership is the willingness to place the needs of others above your own. Great leaders truly care about those they are privileged to lead and understand that the true cost of the leadership privilege comes at the expense of self-interest.²

I. Introduction

In *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, Simon Sinek³ explains how leaders create loyal and trusting followers who will improve the organization. Sinek became famous on the TED Talk⁴ circuit for presenting engaging speeches on leadership and innovation.⁵ His written work follows the same conversational and easy to comprehend style as his speeches, although it ultimately falls short of providing the substance and solutions that many readers may desire.

Sinek divides his work into eight parts, but a close reading of the book reveals three broad themes: (1) creating loyalty in organizations, (2) the evolutionary basis of leadership, and (3) leadership lessons. Together, the themes support Sinek's vision of "creat[ing] a new generation of men and women who understand that an organization's success or failure is based on leadership excellence and not managerial acumen."⁶

II. Loyalty and Leadership

The book starts strong, with Sinek masterfully surveying the reasons why some people are unfailingly loyal to others. He begins with the story of "Johnny Bravo,"⁷ the pilot of a U.S. Air Force A-10 attack aircraft. During a deployment to Afghanistan, Johnny Bravo flew dangerous missions through low cloud cover to provide protective fire for special

operations forces pinned down by enemy fire.⁸ The lesson, according to Sinek, is that when leaders "prioritize the well-being of their people," those people will "give everything they've got to protect and advance the well-being of one another and the organization."⁹ Military service is a powerful illustration of loyalty "because the lessons are so much more exaggerated when it is a matter of life and death."¹⁰ Sinek's engaging account causes readers to ponder leadership and loyalty under the most difficult circumstances.

Pivoting from military loyalty to employee loyalty in the corporate sector, Sinek describes the turnaround of South Carolina conglomerate Barry-Wehmiller. Initially a failing collection of manufacturing companies, Barry-Wehmiller became a profitable corporation famous for inspiring intense employee loyalty.¹¹ As he transformed his organization, Barry-Wehmiller chief executive Bob Chapman realized that leadership "is like being a parent, and the company is like a new family to join."¹² After Chapman's epiphany and ensuing culture shift, corporate profits grew while his employees openly declared their love for Barry-Wehmiller and each other.¹³ Through the Barry-Wehmiller example, Sinek effectively communicates the enormous responsibilities inherent in organizational leadership.

Based on his studies of the military and corporate sectors, Sinek concludes that organizations succeed when leaders trust their people, and subordinates trust their leader.¹⁴ Sinek refers to a culture of trust and empathy as the "Circle of

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¹ SIMON SINEK, LEADERS EAT LAST: WHY SOME TEAMS PULL TOGETHER AND OTHERS DON'T (2014).

² *Id.* at xi (quoting Lieutenant General (Retired) George J. Flynn, U.S. Marine Corps).

³ Simon Sinek is an adjunct staff member at the RAND Corporation. *Simon Sinek Biography*, START WITH WHY, https://www.startwithwhy.com/Portals/0/Bio%20and%20Press%20Kit/simon_bio_long_2014.pdf (last visited July 13, 2016) [hereinafter *Sinek Biography*]. He is the author of the bestselling book *Start With Why*. Sinek, *supra* note 1, inside front cover.

⁴ Established in 1984, TED (originally Technology, Entertainment, and Design) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to spreading ideas at global conferences through the use of short talks of eighteen minutes or less. *Our Organization*, TED.COM, <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization> (last visited July 13, 2016).

⁵ As of this writing, Sinek's TED Talk, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action" was the third most popular TED Talk of all time. *The Most Popular Talks of all Time*, TED.COM, http://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the_most_popular_talks_of_all (last visited July 13, 2016). Sinek's

speech was the second most popular TED Talk at the time of the book's publication. Sinek, *supra* note 1, inside front cover.

⁶ *Sinek Biography*, *supra* note 3.

⁷ SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 3. Johnny Bravo is the call sign of U.S. Air Force Captain Mike Drowley. *Id.*

⁸ *See id.* at 3-8.

⁹ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *See id.* at 9-18. For the complete Barry-Wehmiller story, see BOB CHAPMAN, EVERYBODY MATTERS: THE EXTRAORDINARY POWER OF CARING FOR YOUR PEOPLE LIKE FAMILY (2015).

¹² SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 17.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *See id.* at 18.

Safety.”¹⁵ The primary role for leaders is to protect “those inside their Circle.”¹⁶ Leaders serve as a sort of gatekeeper who decides on what members to let inside the Circle.¹⁷ They are also responsible for the size and strength of the Circle.¹⁸ When the Circle is present and strong, “collaboration, trust and innovation result.”¹⁹ The Circle of Safety neatly ties together Sinek’s ideas on employee loyalty and evolutionary biology.

III. Evolution and Leadership

In the middle section of his book, Sinek explains the evolutionary underpinnings of the Circle of Safety. As he puts it, “Everything about our bodies was designed with one goal—to help us survive. This includes feelings of happiness.”²⁰ Through thousands of years of evolution, human bodies developed a complex set of positive and negative emotions to enhance the species’ ability to survive.²¹ Consequently, humans have become social machines whose bodies create chemical rewards in a positive leadership culture.²² Sinek deftly enlightens the reader about the biological bases for protection and support in the work environment.

Sinek begins the section on neurological chemicals with a stimulating question: “It’s common knowledge that we shouldn’t go to the supermarket when we’re hungry. . . . But the more interesting question is, why do we go to the supermarket when we’re *not* hungry?”²³ The answer to the question lies with the chemicals dopamine and endorphins that stimulate the body when it accomplishes a task or reaches a goal.²⁴ While these chemicals reward primarily selfish action, other chemicals—such as serotonin and oxytocin—reward selfless behaviors.²⁵ Together, these chemicals incentivize humans to set and accomplish goals that benefit the species.²⁶ The last chemical that Sinek discusses is

cortisol, which is “the first level of our fight or flight response.”²⁷ Cortisol provides a valuable service in alerting the body to danger.²⁸ However, cortisol should only remain in the body temporarily; a constant flow of the chemical can be damaging.²⁹ A negative work climate increases cortisol levels in employees, which is bad for organizations and the health of their workers.³⁰ Although the chapters on neurotransmitters are heavy on scientific concepts, Sinek lays his foundation in a straightforward, understandable way.

With the description of neurological chemicals in place, the thrust of Sinek’s argument is that leaders and followers are biologically primed to work together for the sake of the organization. As Sinek puts it, “Trust is a biological reaction to the belief that someone has our well-being at heart.”³¹ When leaders fail to set an appropriate culture in their organization, the subordinates experience increased stress and the organization suffers.

It is at this point, about one-third of the way through the book, where Sinek strays from leadership lessons into personal political opinions unconvincingly supported by his neurological theories. Sinek claims that President Reagan’s act of firing air traffic controllers in the early 1980s gave “tacit approval from on high” for business leaders to conduct massive layoffs.³² He blames market instability on a chemically imbalanced business culture, “[A] system of dopamine-driven performance that rewards us for individual achievement at the expense of the balancing effects of serotonin and oxytocin It is this imbalance that causes stock markets to crash.”³³ Sinek attributes ills in corporate America to “unbalanced levels of dopamine driving behavior and too much cortisol flowing”³⁴ He finds similar faults with the political system, panning former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich for “tinkering with a system that wasn’t really broken.”³⁵ Sinek speculates that current partisanship

¹⁵ *Id.* at 22.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 23.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *See id.* at 23-25.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 24.

²⁰ *Id.* at 36.

²¹ *Id.* at 37.

²² *Id.* at 36.

²³ *Id.* at 39.

²⁴ *See id.* at 39-42.

²⁵ *Id.* at 46.

²⁶ *See id.* at 39-52.

²⁷ *Id.* at 54.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.* at 57.

³⁰ *Id.* Leadership experts used to believe that leaders experienced higher cortisol levels than non-leaders, due to the increased responsibilities of their position. *Id.* However, using samples of military officers and government officials, researchers found that leaders actually possessed lower cortisol levels and reported less anxiety at work. *Id.* A related study revealed a significant inverse relationship between the subjects’ sense of control and cortisol levels. *Id.* Put plainly, if a person feels a greater sense of control at work, they are less likely to feel stressed. Gary D. Sherman et al., *Leadership is Associated with Lower Levels of Stress*, 109 PROC NAT’L ACAD. SCI. U.S. AM. 17903-07 (2012).

³¹ SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 66.

³² *Id.* at 92. Sinek provides no examples, nor cites any source, in support of his contention that business leaders interpreted President Reagan’s action as permission to conduct mass layoffs within their organizations. *See id.* at 224.

³³ *Id.* at 94-95.

³⁴ *Id.* at 170.

³⁵ *Id.* at 162. During Gingrich’s tenure, Republicans became the majority party in the House for the first time in forty years. *See Timeline: Clinton’s Years in Office, 1992-2000*, PBS.ORG, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/clinton/> (last visited July 13, 2016).

stems from a limited flow of social chemicals: “The reason our Congress is as ineffective as it is, is just a matter of biology.”³⁶ At several places throughout the section, Sinek seems to abandon his discussion on leadership in favor of advancing a political or ideological agenda.

The middle section of the book is puzzling and contradictory. Sinek discusses the importance of leaders treating people with love and care,³⁷ but reduces those feelings to simple chemical transactions in the brain.³⁸ He purports to abhor partisanship, but foments a number of partisan attacks. The book would have been more compelling if Sinek had maintained his earlier technique of simply discussing positive and negative leadership styles and objectively discussing the consequences of each.

IV. Leadership Lessons

In the later chapters of the book, Sinek shifts from his foray into pseudoscience and political criticism back to his strength of discussing leadership lessons. Unfortunately, avid leadership book readers will recognize many familiar narratives from earlier books by other authors. Sinek provides no original analysis to these stories, which exist elsewhere in detail. To illustrate his point of looking closely at a problem to find answers, Sinek presents a story of doctors in the 1840s who discovered that handwashing reduced the spread of puerperal fever.³⁹ Nearly five years earlier, economist Steven Levitt and writer Stephen Dubner spent the greater part of a chapter examining the same subject in their bestselling book *SuperFreakonomics*.⁴⁰ Similar examples of rehashed anecdotes abound. Sinek discusses the positive corporate culture at Southwest Airlines,⁴¹ a topic already covered by multiple authors, including Jim Collins in his 2001 bestseller *Great by Choice*.⁴² For readers who are interested in Sinek’s tale of U.S. Navy Captain David Marquet and his leadership techniques aboard the submarine USS *Santa Fe*, they are best served by reading the bestseller *Turn the Ship Around!*,⁴³ which Marquet wrote in 2013. Perhaps most

painfully, Sinek spends several pages retelling Stanley Milgram’s well-known electric shock experiments of 1961.⁴⁴ Dozens of writers have already examined the Milgram experiments from virtually every possible angle, and Sinek adds nothing new to the discussion.

Sinek concludes with several business and leadership clichés that seem unoriginal and uninspired. Examples include, “Let us all be the leaders we wish we had;”⁴⁵ “We must all start today to do little things for the good of others;”⁴⁶ “To be a true leader . . . starts with telling the truth;”⁴⁷ and, “Leadership is about integrity, honesty and accountability.”⁴⁸ Readers will likely find this advice true, but lacking substance. This section would have been much stronger if Sinek had provided specific recommendations for making organizations into protective and caring environments.

V. Conclusion

Leaders Eat Last contains some outstanding leadership aphorisms (the title of the book among them). However, the lessons seem as though they are better suited for a concise list of leadership principles.⁴⁹ The book reads as an overly long exposition of some essentially simple ideas. For example, Sinek’s “Circle of Safety” concept states that workers are happiest when leaders genuinely care for their subordinates; this seems like a basic principle that does not require several chapters to explain.

Although *Leaders Eat Last* lost momentum in the later chapters, the first section is worthwhile reading for anyone who desires to improve his or her leadership style. Sinek is a gifted public speaker who is capable of delivering incisive leadership lessons. Interested readers will likely gain value from reading Sinek’s earlier work, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*,⁵⁰ or watching one of his famous TED Talks.⁵¹ All prospective leaders could benefit from the book’s essential lesson: “[L]eaders who are willing to eat last are rewarded with deeply loyal colleagues

In 1997, after nearly two years of negotiations, President Clinton reached a compromise with Republicans in Congress to balance the budget. *Id.* In 1999, the administration balanced the budget for the first time in thirty years. *Id.*

³⁶ SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 162.

³⁷ *See, e.g., id.* at 17.

³⁸ As Sinek puts it, “Trust and commitment are feelings that we get from the release of chemical incentives deep in our limbic brain.” *See, e.g., id.* at 78.

³⁹ *Id.* at 182.

⁴⁰ STEVEN D. LEVITT & STEPHEN J. DUBNER, *SUPERFREAKONOMICS: GLOBAL COOLING, PATRIOTIC PROSTITUTES AND WHY SUICIDE BOMBERS SHOULD BUY LIFE INSURANCE* (2009).

⁴¹ *See* SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 213.

⁴² JIM COLLINS & MORTEN T. HANSEN, *GREAT BY CHOICE: UNCERTAINTY, CHAOS AND LUCK—WHY SOME THRIVE DESPITE THEM ALL* (2011).

⁴³ L. DAVID MARQUET, *TURN THE SHIP AROUND!: A TRUE STORY OF TURNING FOLLOWERS INTO LEADERS* (2013).

⁴⁴ *See* SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 99-107. *See also* STANLEY MILGRAM, *OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY: AN EXPERIMENTAL VIEW* (1974).

⁴⁵ SINEK, *supra* note 1, at 216.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 150.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *See, e.g.,* COLIN POWELL & TONY KOLTZ, *IT WORKED FOR ME: IN LIFE AND LEADERSHIP* (2012). The book contains General Colin Powell’s “Thirteen Rules” for future leaders. *Id.* at 4-30.

⁵⁰ SIMON SINEK, *START WITH WHY: HOW GREAT LEADERS INSPIRE EVERYONE TO TAKE ACTION* (2011).

⁵¹ *See, e.g.,* Simon Sinek, *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*, TED.COM (Sept. 2009), http://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action?language=en.

who will stop at nothing to advance their vision.”⁵²

⁵² SINEK, *supra* note 1, inside front cover.