

*Leadership Lessons from the Stories of
Shakespeare, Steinbeck, and Shaw:
What Fiction can teach Executives about
Effectiveness.*

Joshua Lee Henry

Drucker Challenge 2013

Table of Contents

Introduction: Leadership, Literature, and the Liberal Arts	3
Leaders are Readers.....	4
William Shakespeare: The Fall of Charismatic Leaders	7
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	7
<i>Macbeth</i>	8
John Steinbeck: The Meaning of Work	9
<i>Grapes of Wrath</i>	10
<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	10
George Bernard Shaw: Man’s Continual Improvement	11
<i>Man and Superman</i>	11
<i>Arms and the Man</i>	12
Conclusion: Innovation, Inspiration, and Imagination	13
Moving from the Individual to a Society.....	13
Bibliography	15

Introduction: Leadership, Literature, and the Liberal Arts

Leadership is the lifting of a man's vision to higher sights, the raising of a man's performance to a higher standard, the building of a man's personality beyond its normal limitations."

(Drucker, 2004. pg. 108)

Peter Drucker believed that leadership, like management, and society should always be focused on improving the quality of life for both the individual and community as a whole. All organizations need effective and ethical executives that can lead them with technical knowledge and a humanistic touch. Since leadership is about motivating, equipping, and training people, there are many lessons from literature and the liberal arts that can shed insights to the human conscience and provide practical, real-world advice for lifting a person or team's vision, improving their performance, and building the overall potential.

In the 2008 revision of Peter Drucker's classic *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, and Practices*, Joseph A. Maciariello, a longtime friend of Drucker's, brings fresh life to Peter's magna opus for another new generation of corporate and organizational leaders. In chapter 2: Management as a Social Function and Liberal Art, the authors outline seven basic characteristics of management that are applicable to any enterprise. First, they say that "management is about human beings. Its task is to make people capable of joint performance, to make their strengths effective and their weaknesses irrelevant" (p. 23). Second, the authors note that "because management deals with the integration of people in a common venture, it is deeply embedded in culture." While management and leadership are similar, they have intentions that are quite different. And although Drucker, the "Father of Modern Management", never explicitly wrote a book on leadership, he nonetheless had much to say on the topic. In essence, management and leadership are two sides of the same coin. Both are needed in different ways for any organization

to grow and make a contribution to the greater good of the society. As for a short distinction, management focuses on processes while leadership focuses on people. Therefore leadership, the heart of management, is also a liberal art.

Drucker wrote that because management “deals with people, their values, their growth, and development— this makes it a humanity. So does its concern with the impact on social structure and the community...Management is thus what tradition used to call a liberal art: ‘liberal’ because it deals with the fundamentals of knowledge, self-knowledge, wisdom, and leadership; ‘art’ because it is practice and application. Managers draw on all the knowledge and insights of the humanities and the social sciences—on psychology and philosophy, on economics and history, on ethics as well as on the physical sciences... For these reasons, management will increasingly be the discipline and the practice through and in which the humanities will again acquire recognition, impact, and relevance” (2008, pg. 24-25). Therefore, managers and leaders are transformational change agents for society. Their responsibilities extend beyond their organizations and into the world where people are, where life happens.

Leaders are Readers:

People create culture and culture creates societies. Culture consists of the shared values, beliefs, worldviews, and accepted behaviors among a specific people group. Traditionally, the most common outlet for expressing a culture came in the form of stories. Because people are innovative, imaginative, and adaptive creatures, any reflection on the work of some of history’s most influential writers is worth considering. Reading the famous narratives of the past is a great way to analysis the present, as well as, plan for the future. Therefore, fiction has much to teach executives about effectiveness.

The adage is true, “leaders are readers”. Anyone desiring to lead effectively will not only commit to hours of studying industry trends, the global economy, and local affairs, but will also allocate a significant percentage of time to enriching themselves through reading. A serious reflection on topics outside of a one’s industry, yet still relevant to a culture of consumers and contributors, will improve their leadership performance. And while reviewing news articles, data spreadsheets, and other factually based research is important for the immediate response, fictional narratives provide leaders with a larger perspective into the intrinsic nature of humanity.

In a recent IdeaCast titled “Read Fiction and be a Better Leader” from the Harvard Business Review blog, Harvard business school professor Joseph Badaracco shared his wisdom from years of teaching leadership. In the interview, Badaracco states that “what makes literature so valuable in the classroom is that it helps students really get inside individuals who are making decisions. It helps them see things as these people in the stories actually see them. And that's because the inner life of the characters is imagined and described, in many cases, by brilliant writers whose sense of how people really think and how they really work have been tested by time over decades or even centuries.” Badaracco goes on to say that “you could describe what fiction does particularly well is it introduces people to ethical complexities. And some of the complexities are around the ethical principles. Others are more emotional, psychological around things involving self-discipline, focus. They really see the large, complex, sometimes messy sphere of things that are genuinely ethical.”

In Steven Snyder’s book *Leadership and the Art of the Struggle* (2013), Snyder reflects on his former classmate’s work by saying that “Badaracco’s premise was that fiction opens a new portal on leadership, deepening the understanding of leadership as a human endeavor, a reality that is often absent in other leadership approaches. By delving into the raw humanity of

these flawed yet often heroic characters, Badaracco guided his students to a compelling insight: leadership is a struggle by flawed human beings to make some important human values real and effective in the world as it is” (p. 5). In a similar vein to Badaracco’s interview, famed management consultant Jim Collins advocates the priority of reading of fiction. Under the articles section of his website, the disciple of Drucker applauds several long lists of recommend readings, of which management books are scarce. In the article entitled “Book Value” which originally appeared on Inc. in 1996, Collins states that “Executives should read fewer management books. I don’t mean that reading is a waste of their time; on the contrary, they should read more. The question is what to read. My own view is that only one book in twenty should be a business book... More importantly, outstanding leaders and thinkers often get their best insights by reading outside their primary field.” With just a quick glance at the large list, one can see that the majority of books recommended by Collins are either fictional or historical. Be they narratives or biographies, the principle is the same: people learn about themselves and others through reading about the lives of various characters.

Collins, who wrote forwards to two books by Drucker, *The Daily Drucker* (2004) and *Management* (2008), echoed his mentor’s own sentiments. In a Bloomberg Business week column, “The Drucker Difference”, Rick Wartzman, the executive director of the Drucker Institute at Claremont Graduate University, wrote a piece in August 2009 entitled “Management as a Liberal Art”. In it he recalls what Drucker wrote to a friend in 1997. He cites that Drucker penned: "I am rereading each summer—and have for many years—the main novelists." Drucker then added "I never read management books; all they do is corrupt the style." As this example shows and others have been noted, any significant trend in management, leadership, and organizational or societal thinking can be traced back to Peter Drucker.

With this understanding of what leadership can learn from the liberal arts and literature, the remaining portion of this essay will look at six classic stories from three of the Western world's most influential, fictional writers: William Shakespeare, John Steinbeck, and George Bernard Shaw. Instead of retelling each story, the metanarrative themes will be drawn out, analyzed, and then compared to Drucker's thoughts on the subject matter, thus providing leadership lessons applicable for effective executives today.

William Shakespeare: The Fall of Charismatic Leaders

"The desire for charisma is a political death wish. What matters is not charisma. What matters is whether the leader leads in the right direction or misleads."

(Drucker, 2004. pg. 50)

Peter Drucker did not consider charisma an important quality in leadership. Instead of focusing on exhibiting a dynamic personality, Drucker instead advocated the need for responsibility, transparency, and accountability. In his book, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization* (1990) Drucker states that the three most charismatic leaders of the twentieth century were the horrific trio of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. Indeed, these men were not leaders, but rather "misleaders". Much like Shakespeare's stories of *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, when leaders become consumed with their ego their ability to equip their people fails. Leadership then becomes about maintaining a position of power instead of empowering others. An unhealthy amount of charisma can lead to narcissism. Much like the Greek myth of Narcissus, for whom the sin of vanity is named from, many like him find their fate in tragic death.

Julius Caesar:

Essentially, the story of *Julius Caesar* (1971) is less about the man who ruled Rome and more about how his arrogant and charismatic personality was potentially the character flaw that led to his untimely death, a civil war in Rome, and the beginning of the end of the world's most powerful empire. Caesar, a successful war general assumed a dictatorship over the populous. While Rome was still technically a republic, Caesar had ultimate say. Though the conspirators who plotted his murder did not approve of his authoritative style, many in Rome loved him for the joy that he gave the people. Nonetheless, to this author's interpretation, Caesar's demise was a result of his own haughtiness. It is rare that conceit produces consensus in leadership.

William Cohen, the first graduate of Peter Drucker's executive Ph.D program, in his book *Drucker on Leadership* (2010) writes that of the "Seven Deadly Sins of Leadership" the Sin of Pride is the worst. Cohen writes that "the problem comes when leaders believe themselves so special that ordinary rules no longer apply. Generalized pride—as opposed to being proud of specific things—is the most serious leadership sin because it can lead to the other six. Sometimes even the perception of what the leader does while committing this sin will make things far worse" (p. 87). This was certainly the case with Julius Caesar. His victories in the political arena and battlefield gave him a pride that led to his belief that he was invincible and even divine. Unfortunately this also led to his downfall. However, as Alan Axelrod points out in his book *Julius Caesar CEO* (2012) "if language is any measure, Julius Caesar set a cross-cultural, pan-historical standard of leadership. Not long after he was assassinated, the name "Caesar" became a synonym for ruler" (p. 2).

Macbeth:

Shakespeare's story of *Macbeth* (1771) mirrors the bloody assassination of Caesar and also the corruption of power in leadership. Macbeth, a Scottish Thane, is consumed with pride and ambition, so much so that he kills the Duncan, the King of Scotland and assumes the crown. However, once in charge Macbeth becomes incredibly obsessed with keeping his rule that he disregards any morality. Power hungry and paranoid, he ends up having anyone who threatens his kingdom killed. This leads to distrust among Macbeth's own army and he is eventually assassinated. Again, it was charisma and pride that led to the fall of a once great leader. However, as Cohen points out, charisma is not always a bad thing in leadership. He writes, that "leaders should heed Drucker's warning not to become misleaders, but charisma... is useful as a component of Drucker's requirement to lead and motivate workers to peak performance" (p. 209). This type of leadership is what James McGregor Burns calls in his classic book *Leadership* (2010) transformational leadership as opposed to the traditional tyrannical type of transactional leadership.

John Steinbeck: The Meaning of Work

"It is perhaps the biggest job of the modern corporation –to find a synthesis between justice and dignity, between equality of opportunities and social status and function"

(Drucker, 2004. pg. 193).

Peter Drucker understood the importance of work and finding meaning in work to improve not only the human condition at the individual level, but also in the community. Work provides achievement, and to some degree, an identity. Be it manual labor in a field, or among "knowledge workers", a term coined by Drucker in his 1969 book *The Age of Discontinuity*, the themes of a functioning society like productivity and managerial responsibility are the same.

Grapes of Wrath:

In the 2008 book *Obscene in the Extreme* the executive director of the Drucker Institute, Rick Wartzman presents a historical analysis of the political and economic revolution taking place in the United States during the 1930's. The main themes of the American classic *Grapes of Wrath* (1976) include man's inhumanity to his fellow brethren, impoverished leadership structures, the saving power of family and friends in fellowship, and the role of dignity in work. The fictional family, the Joads, who are driven from the land in Oklahoma represent the thousands of families who struggled during the Great Depression. In his book, *Concept of the Corporation*, Drucker writes that "we can only deny social status and function to the economically unsuccessful if we are convinced that lack of economic success is (a) always a person's own fault, and (b) a reliable indication of his or her worthlessness as a human personality and as a citizen" (Drucker, 2004. pg. 193). In this book Drucker compares the business to a society that brings citizens together. It combines lessons drawn from politics and economics, while presenting management as the essential element needed to produce effectiveness both inside and outside the company.

Of Mice and Men:

Like *Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck again addresses the economic and social issues of the 1930's in his other classic in American literature, *Of Mice and Men* (1963). While the former dealt primarily with public discrimination, the latter's focal concern is the loneliness that resulted from general labor as a hired farm hand. The story focuses on two main characters, the migrant working duo of George and Lennie. The two are an odd couple. George is a smaller man with

sharp perception while Lennie is very large and has a mental disability. George looks after Lennie and the two are working to save up to buy their own farm. While George laments over taking care of Lennie, he knows Lennie is the only friend he has. In an unfortunate string of events Lennie accidentally kills a woman and George is forced to shoot Lennie in order to save him from the torture of an angry farm mob.

In his book, *The Fabric of this World* (1990) author Lee Hardy writes a section entitled “Peter F. Drucker: Respect for Persons, Management, by Objectives, and Responsible Work” and states that “the key as Drucker puts it, is to see people as resources rather than problems and to lead them rather than control them” (p. 167). These concepts of human dignity and the necessity of human relationships are critical in establishing leadership effectiveness.

George Bernard Shaw: Man’s Continual Improvement

“Knowledge people must take responsibility for their own development and placement...

You have to reinvent yourself.”

(Drucker, 2004. pg. 27)

Man and Superman:

While George Bernard Shaw’s play *Man and Superman* (1960) turns the typical Don Juan story on its’ head by having a female pursuer, the ideas of genetic adaptation in hopes of designing the perfect male specimen through preceding generations, takes what Drucker meant with the intellectual and social and applies it to the physical desire of man’s continual improvement. Tying the themes of Shakespeare together with that of Steinbeck, Shaw’s letter to Arthur Bingham Walkley in the introduction of *Man and Superman*, the Irish author states that “Philosophically, Don Juan is a man who, though gifted enough to be exceptionally capable of

distinguishing between good and evil, follows his own instincts without regard to the common, statute, or canon law; and therefore, whilst gaining the ardent sympathy of our rebellious instincts, finds himself in mortal conflict with existing institutions” (pg. 239). While romantic in its nature, *Man and Superman* confronts leadership lessons such as sacrificial love, continuous improvement, and completing a mission through a set of objectives.

Arms and the Man:

The thematic elements of this second play by Shaw are inherent of his philosophy concerning social issues and specifically war. Shaw, like Drucker, was well aware of the atrocities of war resulting from dictatorship. In Shaw’s story, the author uses mercenaries, deception, and manipulation in his plotline to show how what Drucker called “misleaders” thrive on lording their power over people. Drucker knew all too well the horrors of a dictatorship. In his landmark book *Management* Drucker offered his solution for preventing the tyranny of misleadership. He writes that “the alternative to autonomous institutions that function and perform is not freedom. It is totalitarian tyranny... If the institutions of our pluralist society of institutions do not perform in responsible autonomy we will not have individualism and a society in which there is a chance for people to fulfill themselves... Tyranny substitutes one absolute boss for the pluralism of competing institutions. It substitutes terror for responsibility... Performing, responsible management is the alternative to tyranny and our only protection against it” (Drucker, 2004. pg. 12). In Shaw’s first play, we see the desire for relationship and perfection between two people. In this second story by the great playwright, we see again elements of the romantic couple in the first. However, instead of two lovebirds, the need for relationship, continual improvement, and autonomy are based at the societal level.

Conclusion: Innovation, Inspiration, and Imagination

“Innovation and entrepreneurship are thus needed in any society... they promise to keep the economy, industry, public-service, or business flexible and self-renewing”

(Drucker, 1985. pg.254).

In Peter Drucker’s book *Innovation and Entrepreneurship* (1985), Drucker’s thinking again showed decades before his time. The basis of the book is that through innovation, inspiration, and imagination, the individual will propel themselves toward new knowledge, which would result in the application and advancement of organizations thus moving a society forward.

Moving from the Individual to a Society:

“In an entrepreneurial society individuals face a tremendous challenge, a challenge they need to exploit as an opportunity: the need for continuous learning and relearning... The emergence of the entrepreneurial society may be a major turning point in history”

(Drucker, 1985. pg. 263-265).

Drucker encouraged management’s foundation be built on the responsibility leaders have for making life better, for both the individual and society. This happens in part through accountability, performance, and measurable results. But having a skilled hand and enlighten head are not enough. Leaders need to have a heart for their people. When executives are equipped for effective management and ethical leadership, not only through technical training, but also with inspiration from the liberal arts and supplemented with humanistic insights from

fiction literature, our leaders will be able to raise their people's vision, improve performance, and increase an organizations potential.

Bibliography

Axelrod, A. (2012). *Julius Caesar CEO: 6 Principles to Guide & Inspire Modern Leaders*. New York: Sterling Publishing.

Blanchard, K and Johnson, S. (1983). *The One Minute Manager: The Quickest Way to Increase Your Own Prosperity*. New York: A Berkley Book.

Burns, J. (2010). *Leadership*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Cohen, W. (2010). *Drucker on Leadership: New Lessons from the Father of Modern Management*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Collins, J. (January 1996). "Book Value" *Inc*.

http://www.jimcollins.com/article_topics/articles/book-value.html.

Accessed July 3, 2013.

Drucker, P. (1967). *The Effective Executive*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

_____ (1968). *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

_____ (1972). *Concept of the Corporation*. New York: The John Day Company.

_____ (1985). *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practices and Principles*. New York: Harper & Row.

_____ (1995). *Managing in a Time of Great Change*. New York: Truman Talley Books.

_____ (1999). *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*. New York: Harper Collins.

_____ (2002). *Managing in the Next Society*. New York: Truman Talley Books.

_____ (2005). *Managing the Nonprofit Organization: Principles and Practices*. New York: Harper Collins.

_____ (2006). *Classic Drucker: Essential Wisdom of Peter Drucker from the Pages of*

- Harvard Business Review*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.
- _____ (2008). *The Essential Drucker: The Best of Sixty Years of Peter Drucker's Essential Writings on Management*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Drucker, P. with Maciarillo, J. (2004). *The Daily Drucker: 366 Days of Insight and Motivation for Getting the Right Things Done*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Drucker, P. with Maciarillo, J. (2008). *Management: Revised Edition*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Drucker, P. with Wartzman, R. (2010). *The Drucker Lectures: Essential Lessons on Management, Society, and Economy*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Hardy, L. (1990). *The Fabric of this World: Inquires into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- HBR IdeaCast (June 20, 2013). "Read Fiction and Be a Better Leader: An Interview with Joseph Badaracco. <http://blogs.hbr.org/ideacast/2013/06/read-fiction-and-be-a-better-l.html>
Accessed July 3, 2013.
- Hunter, J. (1998). *The Servant: A Simple Story about the True Essence of Leadership*. New York: Crown Business.
- Lencioni, P. (2002). *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Maciariello, J. and Linkletter, K. (2011). *Drucker's Lost Art of Management: Peter Drucker's Timeless Vision for Building Effective Organizations*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Shakespeare, W. (1971). *Julius Caesar*. Woodbridge: Apollo Books.
- Shakespeare, W. (1971). *Macbeth*. Woodbridge: Apollo Books.
- Shaw, G. (1960). *Plays by George Bernard Shaw: Man and Superman, Arms and the Man, Mrs.*

Warren's Profession, Candida. New York: The New American Library of World Literature Inc.

Steinbeck, J. (1963). *Of Mice and Men*. New York: Bantam Books.

Steinbeck, J. (1976). *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin Books.

Snyder, S. (2013). *Leadership and the Art of the Struggle: How Great Leaders Grow Through Challenge and Adversity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Wartzman, R. (2008). *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Public Affairs.

Wartzman, R. (August 7, 2009). "The Drucker Difference: Management as a Liberal Art"
http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/aug2009/ca2009087_146668.htm.

Accessed July 3, 2013.