

The title speaks for itself. Ethics, Reason, & Excellence very succinctly and effectively delivers a unifying and universal perspective on leadership based on keen observations of human nature, insightful applications of human psychology, and an astute examination of three principles that are assured to make any manager a successful leader.

Ethics, Reason, & Excellence: A Simple Formula for Leadership

By Kevin Unruh

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ETHICS,
REASON,
&
EXCELLENCE

A Simple Formula for Leadership



KEVIN UNRUH



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Chapter 1

The Right Thing

I was in a fraternity many years ago. I don't want to distract from the story by discussing too many details of this fraternity lest I get us all caught up in the inevitable biases of ultra high-stakes, Panhellenic politics (who is better than whom, and so forth). So, I hope it will suffice for me to say that it was a great (and very atypical) fraternity.

Anyway, one Saturday afternoon at the fraternity, I was walking past the office of the newly elected house president when I popped my head in to say hello. He said hi, and, in a slightly apprehensive way, asked me if I had a minute to talk. I said of course and stepped in to talk to him about what appeared to be, based on the micro-contortions of his face, a relatively urgent concern.

With a humble but rather tense smile, he said, "I'm nervous."

"About what?" I asked, though I already knew, generally, that he was talking about being the new president.

"I'm not sure I know how to do this," he said.

"Sure you do," I told him.

"I do?" he asked. "Why are you so confident and I'm not?" he laughed uneasily.

"Because it's simple," I said.

"Well, that's a relief," he said. "So what do I do?"

I paused for just a second and said, "Do the right thing." [This was before the movie of the same name, by the way.]

He smiled again and laughed, even a little more confused than before. "That's it? That's all you've got? I thought you were supposed to be smart?" he pleaded, light-heartedly, but clearly hoping that the *real* wisdom I must surely have been keeping from him was about to jump out from behind this unhelpful charade.

“Well, think about it,” I said. “What else is there?”

He continued smiling at me (he smiled a lot by nature), seemingly believing that I was still prolonging an already annoying joke. But, as he focused on the words and studied the seriousness in my face, he realized that he had heard the only answer he needed, no matter how unsophisticated it may have sounded.

“I’m not quite sure I know what you mean,” he said.

“Yes, you do... In every decision you make as president, be ethical and logical and you will always do the right thing.”

He paused for a second or two, then smiled at me with a sudden sense of illumination and said, “You’re right.”

“I didn’t tell you anything you didn’t already know,” I said. “You just needed to hear there wasn’t anything more to it.” And that was the truth. He knew what to do and always did. He just needed the confidence that sometimes comes from a little outside reinforcement.

I was 20 years old, then, I think. I had thoughts and philosophies on the topic of leadership sometime before that, of course, but this was the first instance I can recall in which I declared my philosophies with any sense of structure.

After being asked to develop a presentation on the topic of leadership these many years later, I added the construct of *excellence* to the formula as a measure of thoroughness, dedication, and quality, which I am convinced is just as important as the other two pillars of my leadership philosophy.

Leadership is simple. It is. It’s not necessarily easy, but it is simple.

So, if, as I assert, that leadership is simple, then why are there so many smart but poor leaders in the world? Well, you’re in luck. That’s the entire intent of this book: to explain what good leadership is by explaining how do to do it right.

Chapter 3

Craftsmanship

Leadership, just like any other job, requires a few basics in order for the leader to be successful. I will discuss the traits of a good leader soon, but first I want to talk about the essentials, which are even more fundamental than the baseline personalities and behaviors that tend to constitute good leaders.

First and foremost, a leader must be dedicated to the *craft of leadership*. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this particular philosophy. The entirety of this book depends on this premise: that commitment and dedication to the role of leader are paramount to leadership success.

We all know craftsmen that bring credit to their chosen field. Who among us hasn't bragged on a roofer, plumber, woodworker, landscaper, welder, painter, or some other highly skilled craftsman as "the best in town"? All of us expect people who practice a trade or a craft to be the best. And, if they're not, we don't hire their services, and we never recommend them to our friends. Yet, as far as I have observed over the years, the concept of "craftsmanship" in the realm of leadership isn't very common at all. In fact it's downright rare.

Men and women all over the country are put in charge and asked to lead, who, very often too late, are realized by the company and/or employees to be poor leaders, but who, for any number of greater or lesser reasons, are allowed to remain in their positions. Do we not all know of at least ten examples of this phenomenon over the course of our employment histories? So, why is it that we don't treat leadership as a craft in the same way we expect it in other professions? I believe the

reasons are many, but for now – and I will get back to this analysis soon – the point is that we don't. And that's not good.

To be a leader, a true and excellent leader, a person must be as dedicated to his job as a boot maker or a glass blower, for example, is to his.

[Before I go any further, I want to take a moment to say that my use of “he” and “his” is intended as the traditional gender-neutral convention and a simple courtesy to the reader. Yes, I could write “her,” “his/her” and “s/he” when referring to managers and leaders, but the fact is, it is much easier to read a “he” than it is to read the other more cumbersome options, if one is willing to accept that the use of this pronoun is nothing more than exactly what I have stated it is. My use of “he” is not a social statement, and there is no agenda or implication in my use of “he” or “his.” It is a pronoun without insinuation. I assure you I have known many good female leaders. I am simply avoiding clunkiness. And, yes, I am aware that I could use “they” as a means of avoiding gender, but it is simply not grammatically correct, so I won't. I assure you I have no agenda whatsoever, social, political, or otherwise.] I continue...

Like the boot maker and the glass blower, a leader has dozens of different tasks he must perform daily in order to succeed in his craft. And, though the traditional craftsman works with a variety of materials and tools to perfect the object of his craft, a leader of men and women should be no less detailed and perfectionistic in attempting to guide his people to accomplish the mission of the day. Of course, I realize that the two jobs – craftsman and leader – are fundamentally different, but what I will not concede is that the two jobs are different philosophically. The same ideals, convictions, and attentions that make a premier boot maker also make an excellent leader. Until we start recruiting for and expecting from our leaders the same standards we expect from professional craftsmen, it is safe to say that the crop of good and effective leaders won't be any more bountiful than it is today.

But, sadly, at present, many of the so-called leaders filling the ranks of our companies are little more than supervisors or overseers, and some are barely more than babysitters. But, somehow we, as a society, have

become content with this. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that we have simply become resigned to the fact that leaders are just hard to come by, that the pool of good contenders is just too shallow to produce meaningful numbers, and so we are forced to make do with what we have been given. How complacent; how defeatist; how tragic. My assertion, you have probably guessed, is that there must be a real change in our employment culture, a true *transformation*, in order for us to begin developing the leaders we need. This book is an attempt to start this revolution. Yes, I said *revolution*, and I'm not embarrassed that I did. I truly want to help make the world better for every employer and for every employee. Maybe this little book will light the fuse.

The average "leader" tends to get easily derailed from performing the functions of his job. Lack of preparation, lack of know-how, lack of focus, commitment, and dedication are all pitfalls of the average man or woman in charge. The boot maker and the glass blower cannot afford to be preoccupied with or impeded by such things, lest these things be allowed to corrupt the quality of their workmanship and, in time, doom their professional reputations. If leaders were treated as craftsmen, expected to behave as craftsmen, and if leaders comported themselves as if they were craftsmen, "leaders" would truly be leaders and the quotations marks could be removed.

Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence then, is not an act but a habit.

– Aristotle

A leader is someone charged with leading and guiding other people in order to accomplish a mission, and that, to many, sounds like a very difficult job. My ongoing assertion, however, is that it is not particularly difficult, if one is willing to take on the job with the same attitude as the person who chooses to make his craft his profession. If one has a sincere

interest in the job, an aptitude (or a genuine willingness to learn), and the dedication to perfect the role as if it were a craft, the job is relatively easy to do well. *If*.

As I started to “hold forth” earlier, we spend a third of our lives sleeping, a third living life, and a third at work. How we feel about our bosses at work seeps into the other two portions of our lives, which makes a discussion of leadership about as relevant and urgent a topic as I can think of. As most all of us are either employer or employee, the condition of leadership at our place of work affects pretty much everyone, and that condition can be good, bad, or just so-so. Whatever the case, leadership is responsible for how we feel about life for no less than eight hours a day and often quite a bit more than that. That’s a big deal. And because leadership is clearly one of the most significant social constructs bearing on the human condition, I feel compelled to attempt to bring about a change in the way leadership is viewed – which I absolutely believe can be done, if you, the readers, will simply analyze this offering, and assuming agreement, do what you can to spread these philosophies, that is, discuss and model them, until there is a sea change (coming from the landlocked state of Oklahoma, I have absolutely no experience in maritime matters; however, I just couldn’t bring myself to say “paradigm shift” instead) in what it means to be a “boss.”

Some of you may ask, “Is this not a rather lofty goal?” Not to me it isn’t. Any such goal justified and warranted by virtue of being commensurate with the needs of the average employer and especially the average *employee*, who depends on good leadership for sustaining his daily mental health and his financial well-being, seems perfectly pragmatic. Ambitious? OK, but “lofty”? No, I don’t believe so.

Indeed, the benefits of good leadership are many and weighty, so endeavoring to propose a purportedly culture-changing formula, while perhaps presumptuous, is, nonetheless, long past due. And with that, I present the most important part of the foundation: *commitment* to treating the role as a craft. Once an individual has the commitment and the dedication required to be a good leader, all that is left is the method, which can be synopsized in three words: *Ethics, Reason, and Excellence*.

These, I am truly convinced, comprise everything that is needed for leadership to be effective, dependable, and honorable.

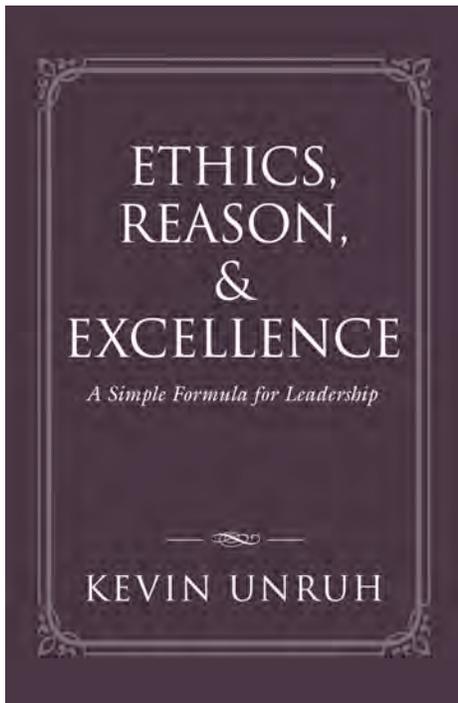
Influence, persuasion, negotiation, active listening, and other elements are all concepts that are commonly discussed in the context of leadership and are important to the general discussion. They are. But they are nothing more than words on a page, if one is not going to focus these principles as a dutiful leader on the good of the employee and the good of the organization. I'm sure any decent book on leadership will discuss these topics to a greater or lesser degree (in fact, even this one will), but without a dedicated effort to use these to facilitate both work-life improvements and production, they are of very little value – other than to sound as though one knows what one is talking about.

I have read a few books on leadership over the last 20-plus years or so, and I skimmed a few more. No, that isn't very many for someone so interested in the topic. But, that's because most generally failed in my mind to truly answer the question and to answer it simply: "How does one do it right?" The ones I did read were well-written and well-received but none of them provided the unifying theory of leadership I was hoping had already been conceptualized. I am in no way suggesting that there aren't at least a few books out there that are truly fine contributions to the discussion of leadership. Hundreds, probably thousands, have been written and I am sure that many of them offer many good insights, instruction, and perspectives. I am saying only that I did not find what I was looking for in them. So, after being asked in 2016 to develop the leadership presentation I mentioned, I decided to write the book I never found, the one I wanted to read.

Inevitably, of course, there will be some of you reading this who can name a book or two that has some similarities to my philosophies and, if so, I am glad. I'm sure they are excellent and deserve reading. In developing my leadership presentation, however, I chose to base my assertions on my own philosophies and observations so that I would have the benefit of true conviction and enthusiasm as I spoke. My sincere and whole-hearted belief is that *Ethics, Reason, and Excellence* presents both a simple and unifying theory of leadership and, in its natural simplicity,

also presents a set of ideas that are minimal in mechanics and process. Which is why this book is brief.

I did not set out to write a short book. It is brief because, as the title itself states, the formula for leadership is simple, and simple formulas should not require hundreds of pages to explain. I simply stopped writing when I felt that I had written all that needed to be written on this topic. Leonardo da Vinci said, “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication,” and I hope that philosophy is demonstrated here.



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