

# A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO USING THE FORCE

# EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

Series editor: Michael J. Urick

The aim of this series is to examine modern and innovative business theories and methods via relatable popular cultural themes. The books will provide academically rigorous and credible applications and solutions to practitioners and upper level business students in a format designed to be highly engaging and effective.

Titles in Exploring Effective Leadership Practices Through Popular Culture:

A Manager's Guide to Using the Force: Leadership Lessons From a Galaxy Far Far Away

*Michael J. Urick*

Leadership in Middle-earth: Theories and Applications for Organizations (forthcoming)

*Michael J. Urick*

# A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO USING THE FORCE

Leadership Lessons from a Galaxy  
Far Far Away

by

**Michael J. Urick**

*Saint Vincent College, USA*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to Janet. I love you very much. You have been a true inspiration to me and I am lucky to be by your side. Though it is debatable which of us is the bigger “Star Wars” fan, based on our fencing experiences, it is clearer which of us would likely be better with a lightsaber.

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Academically, he is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Leadership and Management*, and his research interests include leadership, conflict, and diversity in the workplace. Much of his work examines how popular culture can be used to advance organizational behavior theory. He also often focuses on issues related to intergenerational phenomena within organizations. In addition to authoring or co-authoring over 50 publications, he regularly presents at academic and practitioner international meetings such as the Academy of Management, Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and Institute for Supply Management conferences. He is a regular speaker on age-related issues in the workplace throughout the United States and internationally and is an active consultant on issues related to workplace interactions, organizational culture, and ethics. He has served as a reviewer for a variety of academic publications including the *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, and *Journal of Family Issues* as well as the Organizational Behavior and Human Resources divisions of the Academy of Management Annual Meeting in addition to other conferences. In his monthly blog, he blends his research and teaching interests to suggest practical and actionable items for readers to use in their current or future work situations.

Professionally, he has served in various roles on the boards of ISM–Pittsburgh (including as President), his local Society for Human Resource Management chapter (including as Vice President), and several other non-profit boards. Prior to academia, he worked in a variety of roles related to auditing, utilities, environmental issues, and training and development. In these roles, he became fascinated with interactions in the workplace and how they might be improved which has influenced his academic career.

For fun, he enjoys music and, since 1998, has led and performed with Neon Swing X-perience, a jazz band that has toured through over a dozen US states and released their 10th album in May 2020.

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Of course, I must thank George Lucas and all of the creative minds who worked on the “Star Wars” films, books, shows, and other related media. The characters, situations, and worlds that you created have been an inspiration to me and many others. I thank you for sharing your imaginations and giving us these stories so that our own imaginations can run wild.

# INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF THE FORCE

This is the inaugural book in the “Exploring Effective Leadership Practices through Popular Culture” series, of which I am excited to be the series editor. The purpose of this series is to make leadership theories clearer to readers so that they, in turn, can put them into practice to influence their own management and leadership activities. The vehicle that the authors will use to do this is, of course, popular culture. Our model, therefore, looks like this:

Leadership Theories → Pop Culture Examples → Practice of Leaders

As I mentioned in another book series of which I was co-editor, leadership theories are important (Szpaderski & Urick, 2018). Theories are important because they assumedly have been tested through academic research. This means that elements of academically supported theories are likely to apply to a variety of different contexts.

Those seeking to learn about leadership would be best served to start at the theoretical level rather than looking exclusively at a case study of how leadership was implemented in a specific context. A case study approach void of theoretical underpinning is problematic because it does not allow the student of leadership to understand what in particular was effective (or not) related to a leadership approach. Learning theory first and then understanding how to apply it allows students of leadership to make sense of why a leader’s behaviors were successful within a specific environment. This book and this series strive to leverage the most useful academically supported theories as starting points to explore leadership.

This is not to say that providing examples is not important. Indeed, once one is aware of theories, illustrating these concepts through examples is very useful. This series provides examples from popular culture. In many cases, books in this series will leverage fictional leaders and imaginary situations to illustrate leadership theories. At first glance, this may seem trivial or even

silly to leaders who might want a more grounded real-world approach. But there are two main reasons for why this approach is useful.

First is that using popular culture is fun and memorable. I have read many dry and boring leadership books in the past and I'm sure you have too. Once I've finished them, I often forget what they've said because they don't stick out in my mind. This, of course, makes their major points almost impossible to be able to apply. With this book and this series, my hope is that the reader will have fun over the course of the text. Because of these books' brevity, accessibility, and engaging natures, I believe that readers will remember the core concepts that were discussed.

Second is that people learn from popular culture, even fiction. In a study of how popular movies portray leaders (Urlick, Gnecco, Jackson, Greiner, & Sylada, 2015), colleagues and I argue that college students may be influenced (or not) to select a business major based on whether or not exposure to business managers in popular movies is positive or negative. Thus, exposure to and understanding popular culture influences peoples' behaviors. Discursive theorists have suggested that what is discussed (i.e., what is popular) in society is often trickled down into daily personal interactions that then influence how people communicate with each other (Baxter, 2010). Thus, one can learn to be a more effective leader by becoming aware of and leveraging societal discourses (Fairhurst, 2010). Such discourses that influence personal interactions and leadership styles can be from popular culture sources, even those that are fictional. Thus, pop culture can be a strong driver in setting our behaviors – we learn from, relate to, and mirror behavior that we see in movies, television, novels, and comics among other media.

I hope that this book and this series challenges readers to not only understand leadership theory through pop culture examples but to reflect on how they might adapt the leadership styles that they see to their own context. Thus, putting theories into practice means that a leader must understand a theory through seeing an example but then must also reflect on how that theory might come into play in their own unique group, team, or organization. With such reflection, this book and series will be valuable to readers as they will help to inform ways of influencing and making decisions when connections are made with often fictional areas of popular culture. Anecdotally, I have seen this approach work in the classroom. Semester after semester, students are able to apply leadership theories to their own environments based on classroom discussions that we've had after they've seen theories



illustrated through popular culture. Thus, I believe that the approach of using popular culture to understand and enact positive leadership behaviors is powerful.

In the case of this book, I am asking readers to make a connection from a galaxy far far away to their own environment, whether that is a business, church, government agency, sports team, nonprofit, or other group. That said, why start the series with exploring leadership through “Star Wars”?

“Star Wars” is perhaps one of the most enduring and important pieces of pop culture as suggested by Harvard economist Cass Sunstein in his book *The World According to Star Wars* (2019). This series (encompassing movies, novels, television shows, comic books, theme park attractions, and video games) is a literal “Force” to be reckoned with – even people who aren’t fans are aware of its characters and stories. Who doesn’t know the characteristic breathing pattern of Darth Vader and that he is Luke Skywalker’s father? In fact, “Star Wars” is so well known that it’s one of the most quoted pieces of pop culture of all time as evident from the number of websites that list popular “Star Wars” quotes (Harris, 2020; Kane, 2017; Lenker, 2020).

The creator of the “Star Wars” universe, George Lucas, once remarked that even he does not know why the popularity of this series continues to endure (Wakeman, 2020). Perhaps one of the reasons that so many people like “Star Wars” is that it draws heavily on Carl Jung’s archetypes (Bassil-Morozow, 2018; Jung, 2014, reprint) in ways that resonate with audiences. Even though “Star Wars” is set in distant locales, the characters, themes, and ideas presented seem very familiar to us in a different galaxy and at a different time.

Furthermore, particular tales within the series also model the “hero’s journey” in which a protagonist goes on a quest of mythic proportion that often leads to growth or spiritual enlightenment (Palumbo, 2014). As such, many people (myself included) find both relatability and escapism through “Star Wars.” We see elements of ourselves through the archetypes with which we are familiar and model ourselves after, even if not consciously. We also find escapism from our own world because our own experiences are likely more mundane than those of the characters in “Star Wars” and because we find comfort in knowing that the “good guys” will seemingly always triumph in the end.

Yet, despite it being escapist in nature, we can learn from “Star Wars.” To reiterate the above, I believe we learn more when learning is fun. So, have fun

with this book. I hope you find some insights that can help your leadership practices. And I look forward to future installments of the “Exploring Effective Leadership Practices through Popular Culture” series.

By the way, it should go without say that there are spoilers ahead. For those who need a refresher on characters in “Star Wars,” I have included Appendix 1 which is a table that lists and provides a brief description of each character discussed in this book. Appendix 2 presents a brief synopsis and timeline of each of the “Star Wars” stories discussed herein.

## THE JEDI WAY

There is a scene in the 2017 “Star Wars” film “The Last Jedi” (the eighth episode of the “Star Wars” “Skywalker Saga” that began with “A New Hope” in 1977) in which the Force Ghost of Jedi Master Yoda banters with Jedi Master Luke Skywalker. During their exchange, Yoda refers to books in Luke’s possession and suggests that these ancient Jedi texts are not “page turners” even though they contain some wisdom. Yoda also seems to accuse Luke of not reading them all. It is my hope that would-be Padawans (that’s Jedi-speak for students who seek to learn the Jedi Arts and Ways of the Force) will actually read this book unlike Luke. Perhaps some will even find it to be a page turner.

By the time that Luke and Yoda have this conversation, Luke has been through a lot. In “The Last Jedi,” Luke is feeling quite depressed about the Jedi Order after having spent a lifetime of learning the Ways of the Force and then attempting to train others (including the villainous Kylo Ren), only to see evil arise again even after it had seemingly been defeated. Through his experiences, he lost faith in the galaxy and faith in the Jedi Order. In this state, he was in no shape to be able to serve as the galaxy’s protector, one of the main aspirations of the Jedi Order.

Yet, despite Luke’s jaded perspective at this point in his career, he fails to recognize that the Jedi have done quite a lot of good throughout the galaxy in generations past. In the original “Star Wars” film (“A New Hope”), Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Luke Skywalker that the Jedi have been guardians of justice and peace for thousands of years. The “Prequel Trilogy” films and “The Clone Wars” animated television show provide examples of how the Jedi Order, though flawed and in its decline by the time of Luke Skywalker, sought such high ideals through strict philosophies.

## AN OVERVIEW OF JEDI MANAGEMENT

As I noted in an article published in 2018 in the *Journal of Leadership and Management*, the Jedi Code can provide meaningful suggestions to become a more effective manager and leader. Using the Jedi Philosophy from the “Star Wars” universe is not too far-fetched (Urlick, 2018). In fact, the Jedi Way and other themes from “Star Wars” have been used to analyze and inform a variety of academic disciplines including (but not limited to) philosophy and religion (Bortolin, 2012; Jones, 2017), law (Peters, 2012), media studies (Shefrin, 2004), and psychology (Langley, 2015). There is also a “textbook” that outlines the Jedi Code (Wallace, 2012).

As it is referred to by several characters in “A New Hope,” the Jedi are individuals who practice what seems to be an ancient belief system dating back generations. They believe that they are attuned to the Force, an energy that connects all living things.

By the way, for clarity purposes in this book “Jedi” can refer to a singular individual or a plural group of individuals. Also, I will use the terms Jedi, Jedi Knight, and Jedi Master somewhat interchangeably to delineate someone who affiliates with the Jedi Order or lives by the Jedi Code, as distinctions between these titles are perhaps too nuanced for the purposes of this book (our goal is to focus on becoming Jedi Managers, not necessarily Knights or Masters). Regardless of rank or title, all Jedi live by the following code (Beyer, 2019):

*There is no emotion, there is peace.*

*There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

*There is no passion, there is serenity.*

*There is no chaos, there is harmony.*

*There is no death, there is the Force.*

Of course, though the Jedi were introduced in the fictional “Star Wars” films, there are some individuals who have adapted and adopted their ways and philosophies to fit the real world. When George Lucas created the “Star Wars” universe in 1977, he likely did not know how influential it would become to pop culture. In 2012, Disney acquired the “Star Wars” property from Lucasfilm to continue making “Star Wars” stories. Over the past decades, “Star Wars” has been an immense force in popular culture

spanning movies, television shows, games, books, comics, and even theme parks.

Personally, over the years I have written quite a bit on popular culture, including “Star Wars,” and especially how it relates to theories of organizational behavior. I find such an approach useful for several reasons. First, doing so makes reading about abstract theories and concepts (which might be boring to learn about in a more traditional approach) fun and entertaining. Second is that not everyone might be able to relate to more traditional business examples.

To illustrate, in any one of my graduate classes I teach diverse individuals, some of whom possess decades of work experience while others have virtually no work experience at all. My students come from manufacturing, health care, human resources, information technology, and service industry backgrounds in addition to others. I have taught people who have held the title of Intern all the way through Chief Information Officer (CIO). My students have come from the United States, United Kingdom, India, Germany, China, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Egypt, and Austria to name a few countries. You get the point about how diverse students of organizational behavior and leadership can be. It is unlikely that each have had similar experiences in the workplace that they can all relate to.

So, for me, traditional case studies have not worked as well as using pop culture references. Many of my students, despite their backgrounds, have had experience with elements of pop culture (including “Star Wars”), so using sci-fi examples from a “galaxy far far away” is relatable to most of them. By using these examples, my students can see theories illustrated by an example with which they are likely already familiar. Then, with their increased knowledge of the concept, they can apply their learning to their own personal daily life. This is my approach in this book in which I use the Jedi Philosophy to inform everyday real-world management practices. As such, I will use many examples from the “Star Wars” universe to illustrate leadership theories.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

While familiarity with the “Star Wars” franchise is not necessary to read this book, it may be helpful. Throughout, I will be discussing leadership and

management topics and relate them to examples from the “Star Wars” universe. I will cover the following topics herein.

This first chapter is a basic preview and map of this book. The second chapter will talk about mentoring specifically but also learning more broadly. In many instances, there are clear examples of intergenerational mentorship throughout “Star Wars” stories. There are reasons for engaging in mentorship such as both for learning skills and for leveraging emotional support. In the best cases of mentorship, such a relationship goes two ways in which the mentor and mentee learn from each other.

In the third chapter, I will focus on teamwork. Jedi often work in teams. The Jedi Council also exists as a team based on the types of decisions that they make. There are also various other teams that function throughout the galaxy of which the Jedi are members. This chapter presents examples of teams and illustrates their stages of team development, formation of mental models, and how they manage workload.

Chapter 4 considers the importance of mindfulness. Mindfulness involves being aware of tasks and minimizing distractions. It also suggests that managers not take on too many tasks at once. As the life of the Jedi is also one of reflection, mindfulness suggests maintaining a thoughtful state.

The role of the Jedi and of managers is concerned with self-sacrifice. Therefore, in Chapter 5, I consider how one comes to understand her or his role in relation to others, to practice servant leadership, and to develop a focus on the greater good.

In Chapter 6, I outline the importance of approaches to decision making. As the Jedi have a distinct code of values, I first outline how a few influential ethical frameworks can inform decisions. I focus on some specific frameworks that stress the importance of duties, virtues, and the common good.

The Jedi represent a very influential group throughout the galaxy. In Chapter 7, I discuss how influence is leveraged through various bases of power. Specifically, the Jedi seem to gain much of their influence through building expertise by mastering their discipline of using the Light Side of the Force.

Jedi are confident in how they communicate. They also have a way of presenting “truth” that helps them to influence others. Therefore, Chapter 8 is all about the communication approach of the Jedi.

Chapter 9 concerns important values that must be considered when analyzing the leadership approach suggested by the Jedi. These are the values