

LEADERSHIP IN MIDDLE-EARTH

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 culture 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

Michael J. Urick

Exploring Effective Leadership Practices
through Popular Culture

LEADERSHIP IN MIDDLE-EARTH

Theories and Applications
for Organizations

By

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my parents, Michele and Richard. I still have your copies of “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings” that you gave to me when I was 11 years old. Thank you for that and, even more, thank you for your constant support. At an early age, you encouraged me to pursue a career as a writer and you helped me to grow my imagination. I am forever grateful. I love you both very much.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr Michael J. Urick is Graduate Director of the Master of Science in Management: Operational Excellence (MSMOE) program and Associate Professor of Management and Operational Excellence at the Alex G. McKenna School of Business, Economics, and Government at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, USA. He received his PhD in Management (Organizational Behavior focus) from the University of Cincinnati. His MBA (focused in Human Resource Management) and MS (in Leadership and Business Ethics) are both from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and his Bachelor's degree is from Saint Vincent College. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses related to organizational behavior, human resources, communication and conflict, organizational culture, operations, and research methods.

The MSMOE program, which he directs, focuses on providing aspiring leaders with cutting-edge management techniques to effectively problem solve, minimize waste, and continuously improve their organizations. The program has been consistently ranked as a "Top 50 Best Value Master's in Management" program by Value Colleges and as a "Top Online Non-MBA Business Graduate Degree" by US News and World Report.

He is Six Sigma Green Belt certified and is also certified through the Society for Human Resource Management as well as the True Lean program at the University of Kentucky. He is the recipient of an "Excellence in Teaching" award from the Lindner College of Business at the University of Cincinnati, the "Quentin Schaut Faculty" award from Saint Vincent College, and a "Teaching Excellence" award from the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs among other pedagogical honors. Internationally, he was also recognized by the Institute for Supply Management as a "Person of the Year" in the learning and education category.

He is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Leadership and Management* and the North American Associate Editor of the *Measuring Business Excellence* journal. He is also the Editor for the “Exploring Effective Leadership Practices through Popular Culture” book series from Emerald Publishing.

His research interests include leadership, conflict, and diversity in the workplace. Much of his work focuses on issues related to intergenerational phenomena within organizations. He also often examines how popular culture can be used to advance organizational behavior theory. In addition to authoring or co-authoring over 50 publications including multiple books and peer-reviewed articles, 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 (having presented on four continents) 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 on the boards of ISM-Pittsburgh in various roles including President and the Westmoreland Arts and Heritage Festival. He has also served on the Westmoreland Human Resources Association board in various positions including Vice President. Prior to academia, he worked in a variety of roles related to auditing, utilities, environmental issues, and training and development. Through these experiences, 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 2020.

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Thank you also to the American Tolkien Society and *Journal of Leadership and Management* for publishing my earlier articles related to some of the concepts in this book.

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Fiona Allison has been especially helpful as a champion of this book and the series to which it belongs. Thank you for your enthusiasm and excitement for this project. Thank you also to the entire crew at Emerald for your hard work and dedication.

Thank you to Peter Jackson. Your films helped boost Professor Tolkien's popularity and further cemented "The Lord of the Rings" and "The Hobbit" in their appropriate place of high status in the realm of not just popular culture but also culture in a broader sense.

Lastly, I of course want to thank Professor J. R. R. Tolkien. You are an inspiration to many. Your writings have provided readers (including myself) with comfort in hard times. And, in part because of your influence based on what I learned about your career over time, I explored a career in academia and writing. In doing so, I found my calling as a professor and author.

INTRODUCTION: LEADERSHIP AND FAIRY TALES

Popular culture means different things to different people. To some, a series of densely written works of literature by an Oxford Professor decades ago might not scream “pop culture.” But, to others (myself included), the works of J. R. R. Tolkien are a fundamental piece of pop culture and, thus, have a rightful place in this book series on leadership and popular culture. I view Tolkien’s works, especially those set in Middle-earth including “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings,” to be part of popular culture for at least two reasons.

First, one must examine the impact that especially “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings” continue to have on society. Many of the tropes that exist in the fantasy genre of fictional writing and films are borrowed (or perhaps even stolen) from Professor Tolkien. Authors such as George R. R. Martin (famous for the books that inspired the “Game of Thrones” television series) and J. K. Rowling (famous for the “Harry Potter” series) are two notable examples of authors who have been greatly influenced by Tolkien. There are countless other series of books that draw heavily on Tolkien’s influences and, I would wager that, it would be difficult to find an avid fantasy reader or author who would not acknowledge Tolkien’s influence. This influence, of course, extends beyond fantasy novels but also into movies and even games like “Dungeons and Dragons,” which largely leveraged Tolkien’s mythos in its early stages of development in the 1970s. Of course, “Dungeons and Dragon” and other fantasy games like “World of Warcraft” which are influenced heavily by Tolkien have become major pieces of popular culture in their own rights.

Second, the popularity of Tolkien's work alone merits its place in pop culture. Yes, the Professor's works have greatly influenced other areas of popular culture, but his writings have also been extremely popular. For example, since publication, "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings" have been consistent best sellers around the world (McIntyre, n.d.). All of the movies in Peter Jackson's film trilogies adapted from "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings" are in the 65 top grossing movies of all time worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2020). And perhaps most telling of the Professor's work's popularity is that "The Lord of the Rings" was voted as the greatest book of the twentieth century (O'Hehir, 2001).

Yet, despite their iconic statuses, "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings" are so much more than just artifacts of popular culture. In his work, Tolkien presents readers with a fully realized world inspired by a variety of ancient legends, traditions, and stories. In this world there exist fully developed languages, a history dating back ages, and its own mythology. Thus, Tolkien is writing about a fully planned out realm that appears to be "lived-in." Without being dystopian, Tolkien presents readers with images of a world in decline which uniquely seems both similar and foreign to readers at the same time. It is this level of detail that sets Tolkien's writings, in my mind and in the mind of many others, above other works in which he influenced. This level of detail also sets the Professor's stories as more than just fairy stories for children.

However, earlier in his career, Tolkien's works were seemingly criticized as just that – fairy tales with little substance or bearing on the "real world." Tolkien occasionally felt the need to defend the merits of so-called fairy stories and argued that they were not just for children. Some of the most famous of his statements on this are from his essay entitled *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* (Tolkien, 1936). In it, he argued that myths, legends, and fairy tales should be read, studied, and enjoyed by adults and are worthy of exploring intellectually.

While Professor Tolkien likely did not foresee how influential he and his writings would become, many scholars latched onto Tolkien's arguments and chose to study both his works as well as the myths, legends, and fairy stories of old more seriously in the decades following publication of "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings." Regarding scholarly studies of his own work, researchers have examined connections between Tolkien and theology, philosophy, politics, and linguistics (among many other topics).

Scholarly journals (most notably those of the Tolkien Society and American Tolkien Society) exist for the sole purpose of disseminating research of the Professor's works.

And now, with this book, the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien are being examined through the lens of leadership. Indeed, we can learn quite a lot about leadership and management from Middle-earth. Not surprisingly, Tolkien has much to say about leadership and management. In this book, I will present Tolkien's perspectives on these topics, evident through his writings on Middle-earth, and compare them with what academically supported research on leadership suggests. In doing so, I provide a framework of Tolkien's views on what it means to be a good leader. I hope that this book (and the series to which it belongs) helps to make leadership theories that are supported by research clearer and useful to you. Moreover, I especially hope that this book will help you to reflect on your own leadership practices and, if appropriate, make adjustments to your leadership style. And, of course, I hope that you find this book and the "Exploring Effective Leadership Practices through Popular Culture" series fun and engaging.

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BACKGROUND AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

I want to begin this book with an explanation of why I feel this work is useful and necessary. First, though, I must confess that I am a big fan of “The Lord of the Rings,” “The Hobbit,” and much of Professor J. R. R. Tolkien’s other works. To illustrate to you how much of a fan I am:

- I typically read “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings” at least every other year and “The Silmarillion” about every five years.
- Whenever I write and research, I like a lot of noise in the background. Usually, I like to listen to or watch something that I’m closely familiar with. I’ve seen Peter Jackson’s Middle-earth movies countless times and so they are great for me have on in the background while I work. So much of my research and writings on a variety of topics has been done with Tolkien’s stories (or related music and soundtracks) playing in the background.
- Speaking of music, I once sang Elvish in a choir in Kentucky that performed portions of Howard Shore’s “The Lord of the Rings” movie scores.
- I love listening to “The Tolkien Ensemble,” a Danish choral group that places the songs from Tolkien’s work into melodies, as well as other music inspired by Middle-earth while driving.
- Whenever I have an important presentation to give, I like to wear a Tree of Gondor t-shirt under my outerwear because it gives me confidence.

I've worn such a shirt so often that I've gone through three so far because they've been tattered through traveling and continuous washes.

- My wedding ring was “crafted” by the same ring makers (from New Zealand!) that made the One Ring for Peter Jackson’s films and it is engraved on the inside with Elvish script from a quote by Tolkien.
- Two of the first books I ever read to our newborn daughter before bedtime were “The Hobbit” and “The Silmarillion.”
- We have a replica of Smaug’s head hanging on a wall in our house like a hunting trophy ... and we don’t even take it down before visitors come over!

I could go on and on about my Middle-earth nerdiness, but you get the point. As you can imagine, writing this book has been great fun for me. But, that is not the only reason that I have written this – this book serves a greater necessary purpose, I believe. As a researcher in leadership and organizational behavior, I became aware during one of my many readings of Tolkien’s work that a lot of what he writes about is related to leadership. In 2014, I published a brief article in the *Journal of Leadership and Management* (which has been subsequently published as an edited book chapter two years later) related to how leadership is illustrated in Tolkien’s work. I elaborate a lot more on the themes I first broached in that piece in this book and add also many other leadership concepts into my discussion herein. Overall, the main purpose of that article was to illustrate that real-world business leaders can learn from Tolkien’s Middle-earth. This book’s purpose is very similar though, given the lengthier format, it is able to expand and elaborate on many crucial concepts of leadership.

LEARNING FROM ANYTHING

I am of the mind that people can learn from anything. In my monthly blog on Saint Vincent College’s (where I teach and research) website, I often write about how areas of popular culture can be used to illustrate organizational behavior theories and concepts such as leadership. Such an exercise is not only fun for me but (I believe) also useful to readers as many have told me that it makes

theories clearer to them. Therefore, I believe that it also makes the theories more relevant as they attempt to apply them in their own unique contexts.

Similarly, I have found that using popular culture in my classes is useful as well. When I enter into a classroom to teach leadership, usually the students there are from many different backgrounds. They are demographically different. They have different experience levels. They come from different industries, functional roles, and organizational levels. No two peoples' experiences are exactly the same. That said, it is difficult to provide role-specific or organization-specific examples because they may not resonate with each person due to their unique backgrounds.

Yet, many of these individuals share affinity for common popular books, movies, and television shows. It is even likely that, on occasion, each has fantasized about what it would be like if they were in the shoes of their favorite characters from these pieces of popular culture and made comparisons of their own situations to those of the characters. Thus, it is my approach to illustrate theories of leadership using popular culture so that such students will better understand concepts to help make them better leaders. With the greater understanding of how some of their favorite characters might serve as illustrations of these theories, they can then take the theories and apply them to their own lives. I have found such an approach to be successful. My students tell me that they remember the theories, express that they are able to apply them to their own work life, and report that they have fun learning the concepts. For a professor, these three outcomes are overwhelmingly positive. I think such an approach (like the one taken in this book and series) will benefit all leaders and those that aspire to such roles, not necessarily only those individuals in my classes.

The pieces of popular culture that I personally choose to illustrate theories are selected in part for selfish reasons. They are areas that I know well and that I thoroughly enjoy. Each, however, also must illustrate theoretical concepts very well. Tolkien's stories of Middle-earth fit both of my criteria: I am obviously a fan and leadership theories abound in the Professor's works.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In order to accomplish the goal of taking theories, illustrating them via Tolkien's works to make them more meaningful and then applying them to each reader's situation, this book will take on the following structure:

Following this first chapter in which I outline the purpose and format of the book, I will next provide some background. The second chapter, therefore, will begin with a very brief overview of Tolkien's life and work. Then, I will define what I mean by leadership based on research that has been published over the past several decades. I will conclude the second chapter by examining some of Tolkien's explicit statements and unstated but implied beliefs concerning leadership emphasizing that he is, in fact, not "anti-leadership" as some readers have misinterpreted comments that he has made on the topic.

In the third chapter, I will explore how leaders emerge and how or why they hold on to power. I will specifically contrast the characters of Denethor and Aragorn – the former seeks to hold on to his leadership role while the latter is not as eager to accept a leadership role. This chapter will apply the theory of servant leadership and explore the idea that the traits that allow for a leader to emerge are not necessarily the same traits that allow an individual to be a good leader.

The fourth chapter will be about influence. I will draw on classic research regarding "bases of power" to examine how and why particular characters are influential in Tolkien's works. Then I will suggest that the most influential characters in Middle-earth often are very simple in nature and do not always wield great formal power, at least in the traditional or hierarchical sense as defined by status or role of authority.

I will then discuss teams in the fifth chapter. A lot of "The Fellowship of the Ring," Tolkien's first part of "The Lord of the Rings," is related to teamwork as are some of his other works. This chapter will explore ways to enhance team effectiveness, specifically by examining whether skills or strong interpersonal relationships are more important to effective team composition. Then, I will explore how individuals within a team are motivated. For example, what would make a well-to-do hobbit living comfortably in the peaceful Shire be okay with leaving all that he knows to travel to the hell-like Mount Doom in Mordor?

The sixth chapter will focus on communication. Though the two wizards Gandalf and Saruman communicate in very different ways, both influence followers. Differences in their communication styles will be explored. Attention will then be turned to the character of Samwise Gamgee who, though not always the most articulate in speech, communicates loudly through his actions. I will consider here, then, the role of behaviors in communication.