



Leadership Lessons from Poetry and Prose

Bob Vanourek

The poets and great authors of history have left us a treasury of leadership insights.

Why not plumb the wisdom of the masters of literature and other inspirational leaders to discover effective and timeless leadership principles?

I have a life-long love of leadership, literature, and poetry, and I've realized over time that literature and poetry have a lot to teach us about leadership. These timeless gems of wisdom fell into three broad categories:

- ◇ Leading yourself well first.
- ◇ Leading others.
- ◇ Leaving a lasting leadership legacy.

Here's a taste of the leadership wisdom I found in each category, along with some commentary and practical applications that have occurred to me. (And, may I suggest you read the quoted passages aloud? They have much greater impact that way.)

Leading Yourself Well First

You cannot hope to lead others until you can lead your own life with integrity and manage yourself with discipline. – Stephen R. Covey, leadership expert and best-selling author

British Nobel prize winner Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) wrote the poem “If.” The final stanza reads as follows:

**If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!**

Kipling’s poem is about character, the real you when no one is looking.

One's character is not set in stone, given at birth and unmalleable. Good character can be nurtured and developed through the right parenting, reflection, lessons from our experiences, mentoring, and leadership.

Who is the real you when no one is looking? Do you fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run? If strong character forms the basis of your leadership, you will have willing and committed followers.

President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) wrote “The Man in the Arena,” which says:

**The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,
because there is no effort without error and shortcoming;
but who does actually strive to do the deeds;**

Teddy Roosevelt, arguably one of the greatest U.S. presidents, was a robust, daring leader. He believed it was better to try and to fail than to be one of those “cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.” Sniping from the sidelines isn't good leadership. Leading well means having the inner courage to fight for worthy causes.

American writer Ernest Thayer (1863–1940) wrote “Casey at the Bat,” humorously recounting the dangers of an outsized ego. It closes with:

**Oh, somewhere in this favoured land the sun is shining bright,
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light;
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout,
But there is no joy in Mudville—mighty Casey has struck out.**

Cocky Casey arrogantly let the two first pitches fly past him unheeded as strikes before he finally swung and produced a mighty whiff. I believe the greatest danger to effective leadership is one’s ego. My friend, Chuck Wachendorfer wryly notes, “Your ego is not your amigo.”

English poet William Ernest Henley (1849–1903) wrote the powerful poem “Invictus,” which closes with:

**It matters not how strait [narrow or difficult] the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.**

Henley describes the stark realities of life that we all experience: the black night, the bloody bludgeoning, the wrath and tears, and then the shady darkness of death. But the poet remains undaunted: not wincing, head unbowed, unafraid, the captain of his soul, and the master of his fate. Invictus is Latin for “unconquered.” Good leadership involves captaining your own ship to master your fate regardless of the storms and choppy seas you encounter.

American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) wrote:

If I can stop one heart from breaking

I shall not live in vain

If I can ease one Life the Aching

Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin

Unto his Nest again,

I shall not live in Vain.

Leadership doesn't have to be about commanding armies, becoming a CEO, or saving the world. Regardless of your circumstances in life, regardless of the burdens you carry, you can help heal a broken heart, help relieve someone's pain, or just help a robin back into her nest. Such efforts are loving acts of leadership.

Contemporary poet David Whyte (1955–) writes poignantly about bringing your soul to work to contribute to the collective soul that exists in every organization.

Work helps us to feel safe. The soul is safe already. Safe in its own experience of the world. Work is bounded by time. The soul of a person lies outside of time and belongs to the unknown, it is the sacred otherness of existence. Work belongs to the personality, but the soul is owned by no one, not even by the personality formed around it. The personality will, we are continually amazed, kiss any required part of the anatomy to rise in the world; the soul refuses to kiss anything but life itself, and then, as Blake says, only as it flies ...

We go to work. But it is our soul we put into it. Work is a series of events. The soul, as James Hillman says, turns those workaday events into experience.

Leading yourself well means pursuing your dreams, being thoughtful about your choices, developing your character to conquer your ego, fighting decisively and boldly for worthy causes, flexing your leadership style, finding sanctuary for renewal and reflection on a higher power, and bringing your inner soul to work.

Leading Others

Leadership and life are all about relationships.

Educator and author Parker Palmer (1939–) writes eloquently about heart:

I'm using the word heart as they did in ancient times, when it didn't merely mean the emotions, as it tends to mean today.

**It meant that center in the human self where everything comes together—where will and intellect and values and feeling and intuition and vision all converge.
It meant the source of one's integrity.**

Leading others well means carefully selecting people for head and heart qualities. Head qualities are education, experience, and skills. At the best organizations, good head qualities are the minimum bar for entry. Heart qualities are the true essence of what is desired in colleagues: integrity, character, emotional intelligence, and cultural fit.

In a 1968 sermon, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) talked about the secret wish many of us have to be the Drum Major leading the parade, being first, strutting proud, high-stepping in front of the glorious marching band with cheering crowds overflowing the streets we cavalcade. This desire is the seduction of our egos.

People may begrudgingly comply with an egotistical, autocratic commander, but they don't willingly follow. Conversely, as Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990) so cogently wrote, the power really resides with the followers. They, and only they, will determine if you are a leader or not. They will only willingly follow if they believe you are serving them:

... helping them grow as persons, becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant leaders.

Echoing the work of Robert Greenleaf on servant leadership, Dr. King said:

Everybody can be great because everybody can serve.

Journalist Sydney J. Harris (1917–1986) quoted Thomas Aquinas on lessons many of our political leaders would do well to heed:

Thomas Aquinas, who knew more about education and persuasion than almost anybody who ever lived, once said that when you want to convert someone to your view, you go over to where he is standing, take him by the hand (mentally speaking), and guide him to where you want to go.

You don't stand across the room and shout at him. You don't call him a dummy. You don't order him to come over to where you are. You start where he is and work from that position. That's the only way to get him to budge.

“Leading others well means carefully selecting people for head and heart qualities.”

Chinese author and philosopher Lao Tzu wrote in “The Tao” over 2500 years ago that:

**A leader is best when people barely know that he exists,
not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
worst when they despise him.
Fail to honor people,
They fail to honor you.
But of a good leader, who talks little,
when his work is done, his aims fulfilled,
they will all say,
“We did this ourselves.”**

Leading others well is not about showing how smart and clever you are. It’s about elevating and honoring others so that they feel proud of the work they have accomplished.

After his horrendous internment in Nazi concentration camps during World War II, Victor Frankl (1905–1997) wrote:

We who have lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances—to choose one's own way.

Leading others well means choosing an optimistic, loving attitude regardless of the circumstances. In his inaugural address President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) said,

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

Kennedy put out a clarion call, summoning people to give, not just get; to serve, not just be served. When I heard his stirring words, I was deeply impressed. Here was a leader not afraid to challenge the conventional wisdom where people expected more and more from the Federal government. Are you brave enough in your leadership to challenge the conventional wisdom most people embrace, challenging people to step up to their own responsibilities? Good leaders challenge others to higher standards.

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973) in his Lord of the Rings trilogy tells the story of Eowyn, who longs to do great deeds in battle but is rejected because she is a woman. Undaunted, she disguises herself as a man and travels with the Riders of Rohan, ultimately confronting the evil Lord of the Nazgul, who boasts that he cannot fall “by the hand of man.” Eowyn then removes her helmet, declaring,

But no living man am I! You look upon a woman.

She then slays the Nazgul lord, thus turning the tide of the battle.

Like Eowyn, there are women and men in your organization with heart, passion, and commitment, who are not content to be kept in cages. One of your primary jobs in leading others is to unleash other leaders. You will find that good leaders will emerge from many places in your fellowship regardless of your preconceived prejudices.

Rumi, a 13th Century Persian poet and Sufi mystic, wrote in his poem “Little by Little Wean Yourself” that leading well and living well mean taking chances to venture forth, leaving the comfort of the wombs we all grow accustomed to. I became a better leader and a better person by being willing to venture forth from the known into the unknown in challenging corporate turnarounds.

Ultimately, my fear of radical change dissipated, and I knew we, together, as a cohesive team, could enter any void and find our way through. Learning how to trust my wonderful colleagues so well was a life-changing experience.

Are you stuck in some comfort zone, fearful of venturing forth because you don't know what you'll encounter? Leading others well means taking chances to venture forth.

Britain's Poet Laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), wrote in his poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade”:

**Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
Rode the six hundred.**

While some admire the clear bravery of the Light Brigade, my lesson from this poem is about the “blunder” that led to the the order for such a suicidal charge. Leading others well means truly caring for the well-being of those you lead, not charging recklessly into “the mouth of hell.”

An unknown author tells us tongue-in-cheek about how bureaucracies try to “deal with a dead horse:” changing the rider, beating the horse harder, appointing a committee or hiring a consultant to revive the dead horse, and more. Ultimately, after all else has failed, the bureaucracy invariably promotes the dead horse to a supervisory position. These curious dead-horse verses appeal to me in a perverse way because, like Dilbert cartoons, they hit close to home with their insightful but sarcastic and ironic truth. I have to admit that in my career I often found myself riding some dead horses, and then changing the rider, beating the horse harder, throwing more money at the horse, and more. What a waste. Good leaders acknowledge reality, dismount dead horses, and vault onto mounts that will get them where they want to go.

Leading others well means selecting people for head and heart, serving others not being superficially judgmental or self-righteous. Leading others well means bridging factions, building trust, being accountable, and holding others accountable. It means challenging the status quo, unleashing other leaders as bands of colleagues, and anchoring your leadership in love rather than fear.

Leaving a Leadership Legacy

The leader's unique legacy is the creation of valued institutions that survive over time. – Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, leadership experts and best-selling authors

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) was an English poet who published “Ozymandias” in 1818. The poem tells of a huge statue standing in the desert with these words inscribed on it:

**“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.**

Shelley's poem reveals how people assess and depict us for posterity. People don't remember Ozymandias for the great buildings, temples, and cities he had his slaves build, or the wars that he won. They remember his sneering arrogance, pretension, and the conceit that the sculptors captured in his visage.

American poet Edgar Guest (1881–1959) published a poem entitled “His Example” in 1919:

**There are little eyes upon you, and they're watching night and day;
There are little ears that quickly take in every word you say;
There are little hands all eager to do everything you do,
And a little boy that's dreaming of the day he'll be like you.**

[...]

**There's a wide-eyed little fellow who believes you're always right,
And his ears are always open and he watches day and night;
You are setting an example every day in all you do
For the little boy who's waiting to grow up to be like you.**

What a reminder that our attitudes and actions set an example for many: our colleagues, peers, friends, spouses, and, especially, our sons and daughters whose little eyes and ears are constantly open to what we are doing. They observe whether our actions are consistent with our words. Are we walking our talk? Good leaders role model the behavior they desire to see in others.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), The Bard of Avon, wrote “Sonnet 18” as a love poem. The last two lines read:

**So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.**

Shakespeare makes the incredibly boastful claim that the person addressed in the poem will be immortal because of the words Shakespeare wrote. We read his words today, 400 years later, and wonder who that mysterious person in the poem was.

How many of us will have something written about us that will be long remembered? Will you be remembered for your most glorious job title, or all the material possessions you accumulated? Or will you be remembered as a good person of character and honor and for the positive accomplishments you achieved that made the world a little better place? Leading a good life means creating a legacy people will long remember.

“Are we walking our talk? Good leaders role model the behavior they desire to see in others.”

American social reformer Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) was fined \$100 in 1873 for voting without that legal right. She famously said:

May it please your honor, I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty. All the stock in trade I possess is a \$10,000 debt, incurred by publishing my paper—The Revolution—four years ago, the sole object of which was to educate all women to do precisely as I have done, rebel against your man-made, unjust, unconstitutional forms of law, that tax, fine, imprison and hang women, while they deny them the right of representation in the government; and I shall work on with might and main to pay every dollar of that honest debt, but not a penny shall go to this unjust claim.

It took another 47 years for women to obtain the right to vote in the United States, but the legacy example of Susan B. Anthony and her band of committed colleagues stood as inspiration to those who followed her in the women's suffrage movement.

“ If strong character forms the basis of your leadership, you will have willing and committed followers.

Prime Minister of Great Britain, Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965), was widely regarded as one of the greatest wartime leaders of the twentieth century. In an address to the British House of Commons in 1940, Churchill said:

We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches; we shall fight on the landing grounds; we shall fight in the fields and in the streets; we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

Can you imagine being a Brit huddled around the radio some dark night, listening to Churchill's stirring words while the blitz bombs were falling all around London? Many experts and foreign leaders thought that Britain's chance to survive the Nazi onslaught were nil. But Churchill's unrelenting resolve almost singlehandedly held together the hopes of the British people in their darkest days. The responsibility of leadership is never to give in to evil, as Churchill said, "Never, never, never, never." What a legacy Churchill left.

British Nobel Laureate George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) wrote in 1903:

**This is the true joy in life,
The being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one;
The being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap;
The being a force of nature instead of a feverish,
selfish little clod of ailments and grievances,
Complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.
I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community,
And as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.
I want to be thoroughly used up when I die,
For the harder I work, the more I live.
I rejoice in life for its own sake.
Life is no brief candle to me.
It is sort of a splendid torch, which I've got a hold of for the moment,
And I want to make it burn as brightly as possible
Before handing it on to future generations.**

Our lives should not be brief candles, as Shakespeare said in Macbeth, unremembered after we pass. We should contribute to the “whole community” through our families, friends, neighborhoods, social causes, and especially through our work, whatever it may be, to make a difference with our lives.

Our legacies should be to burn the splendid torches of our lives as brightly as possible before we pass our contributions on to future generations.

Charlotte Bronte (1816–1855), the eldest of the three Bronte sisters, was an English novelist and poet. She published “Life” in 1846:

**Life, believe, is not a dream
So dark as sages say;
Oft a little morning rain
Foretells a pleasant day.
Sometimes there are clouds of gloom,
But these are transient all;
If the shower will make the roses bloom,
O why lament its fall?**

**Rapidly, merrily,
Life's sunny hours flit by,
Gratefully, cheerily
Enjoy them as they fly!
What though Death at times steps in,
And calls our Best away?
What though sorrow seems to win,
O'er hope, a heavy sway?
Yet Hope again elastic springs,
Unconquered, though she fell;
Still buoyant are her golden wings,
Still strong to bear us well.
Manfully, fearlessly,
The day of trial bear,
For gloriously, victoriously,
Can courage quell despair!**

Is your focus primarily on the rainy days, or the sunny ones? Do you have hope for the future, or are you a pessimist? Can you think of at least three things today that will make your future brighter? Then can you initiate some action today to make each of those three things more likely to happen, even if it takes some courage to begin? Leading well means marshaling the courage to make the future brighter for your self and others.

Leaving a leadership legacy has many dimensions. What has been built into the DNA of the organization that will carry on? Is there a meaningful shared purpose, shared values, and inspiring vision of the future? Is there a healthy, vibrant culture? Culture is the legacy of leadership.

How was success achieved? Was integrity absent? Were any stakeholders abused? Was the leader a good role model?

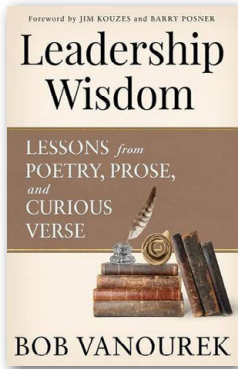
What is the quality of the people at all levels who remain? Are they people with character, showing heart? Are they growing other leaders? Do they respect and trust each other, working collaboratively to unleash their creativity?

Conclusions

Leadership is one of the most studied and discussed subjects over the millennia, but it is still misunderstood. It has evolved over time, yet there are timeless principles of leadership that have been written about over the centuries that are golden repositories of wisdom we can plumb today.

Learning to lead yourself well, how to effectively lead others, and how to leave a lasting leadership legacy are skills we can master, especially if we read the wisdom of the ages. 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Bob Vanourek's *Leadership Wisdom: Lessons from Poetry, Prose, and Curious Verse* is a collection of 70+ poems and prose passages with commentary and practical applications. He is the former CEO of five companies and a frequent speaker on ethical leadership. He is the co-author with his son, Gregg Vanourek, of the award-winning book *Triple Crown Leadership: Building Excellent, Ethical, and Enduring Organizations*.

You can learn more at bobvanourek.com, and follow him on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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