

## **Five great books on leadership**

by  
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### **George C. Marshall: Education of a General (1880-1939) by Forrest C. Pogue**

In this first volume of Pogue's four-volume biography, we do not meet Marshall the five-star general and Nobel Peace Prize winner. We do not meet Marshall the architect of victory in World War II. Instead, we meet Marshall who is a young officer yearning for greatness. On the cusp of World War II and after thirty years of service, Marshall was still an infantry colonel and he sometimes despaired of accomplishing anything of significance. Throughout his military career, Marshall clearly demonstrated that he was a brilliant and visionary leader but the U.S. Army of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not set up to identify and reward brilliant and visionary leaders. The U.S. Army of that time was set up to identify and reward seniority. Even Marshall's promotion to colonel in 1933 had nothing to do with his ability or potential. It came about because, just like every other infantry lieutenant colonel, Marshall spent ten years painfully inching his way up the seniority list of infantry officers. If Marshall's career had simply been in the hands of the Army personnel system, he might have retired as a colonel sometime before World War II and the loss to our nation would have been incalculable. Pogue's book is, in part, a cautionary tale for any large organization because it teaches lessons about the difficult challenges and inestimable benefits of nurturing future leaders.

### **The Smartest Guys in the Room by Bethany McLean & Peter Elkind**

This vivid (and disturbing) account of the rise and fall of Enron powerfully illustrates fundamental truths about leadership. Leaders such as Jeff Skilling were intensely charismatic; creating a corporate culture that motivated many and captivated the national business press. But we know the end of the story. The charismatic leaders were sent to jail and the company imploded in a breathtakingly short period of time. One enduring leadership challenge that Enron exemplifies is that many people consistently confuse short-term organizational success with great leadership. As a result of this misperception, thousands of people (employees, investors, business partners, the media) eagerly bought into Enron's dysfunctional and ultimately destructive corporate culture. Another leadership challenge presented by the Enron example is the difficult task of providing strategic leaders with adequate supervision. As was said so long ago- who will guard the guardians? Corporate governance mechanisms are created to ensure that top managers don't abuse their authority but how does a board of directors limit the influence of

charismatic leaders who are ruthlessly and opportunistically leading a firm to destruction? Many people learn about leadership by studying successful leaders but there is also much to learn from this well-written account of a corporate catastrophe.

**Lee's Lieutenants by Douglas Southall Freeman**

In this three-volume history of the Army of Northern Virginia, Freeman integrates granular detail with a compelling narrative in a way that few historians ever achieve. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia lived for thirty-five months (from the summer of 1862 until its surrender at Appomattox in the spring of 1865). During this time, one hundred and ninety-three soldiers served under Lee as generals. Using a leadership canvas of this size, Freeman provides a vivid array of insights into some of the most fundamental aspects of leadership. To give one example, in the words of one Confederate officer, Lee was "audacity personified" and this quality was matched by his remarkable ability to get others to trust and implement his audacious plans. This atmosphere of trust enabled his army to punch above its weight for several years. Lee developed relationships of unbreakable trust up and down the chain of command that lasted until the last day of the war and this leadership ability is as rare as it is valuable. In stark contrast, consider this list of names: Winfield Scott, Irwin McDowell, George McClellan, Henry Halleck, John Pope, George McClellan (again!), Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker, and George Meade. This is the list of generals that President Lincoln went through before finally developing a trusting and productive relationship with Ulysses Grant. Freeman provides timeless lessons of leadership and clearly shows that great leaders are a resource that can provide organizations with competitive advantage.

**Sam Walton: Made in America by Sam Walton & John Huey**

How does a company that began as one store in Rogers, Arkansas eventually become the world's largest retailer? In this clear-eyed account that avoids the self-congratulatory tone of many CEO memoirs, Sam Walton provides his blueprint for success. He combined an atmosphere of small town retailing and unrelenting operational excellence with a corporate culture that still inspires thousands today. Refreshingly, he isn't bashful about admitting mistakes he made along the way. At one point, his wife, Helen, berated him for failing to adequately share the company's profitability with store associates and Walton admits that it took him "quite a while" to accept that she was right. Jim Collins once wrote an article describing his choices of the ten greatest CEOs of all time. He ranked Walton ranked number three. According to Collins, Walton's most discernable flaw was the overwhelming amount of charisma he exerted as a leader (which made it hard for anyone to replace him). His charisma is evident in the book. Time and again, Walton is able to persuade

people to quit great jobs and come help him get his rickety enterprise off the ground. One unforgettable image from the book will stick with readers. In 1984, Walton lost a bet about company profitability that he had made with a fellow Walmart executive. His well-photographed penalty was to don a grass skirt and do the hula on Wall Street. Charisma, indeed.

***The Iliad by Homer*** One of the oldest, most commonly read works of literature in the Western world is the great war-poem known as the Iliad. Using thousands of lines of hypnotic verse, it focuses in a serious way on important and timely questions of leadership. From the beginning of the saga, Agamemnon and Achilles are two very different Greek leaders who were furiously dueling for power and influence. They are a fascinating contrast because their leadership derives from completely different sources. Agamemnon is an influential leader because he is invested in the divine authority of kings. In contrast, Achilles is an influential leader because of his unmatched prowess as a warrior on the battlefield. They are completely different leaders yet both have a powerful ability to shape the morale, the behavior and the performance of ferocious Greek warriors. Several years ago, I learned of the relevance of the Iliad. While teaching cadets at West Point, I asked them to identify great leaders. The vast majority of leaders fell into two general categories. The first, and largest, category, was “leader of authority.” This type of leader (a president, a general, a CEO) is one who successfully wields the authority granted them by their organization. The second-largest category was “leader of excellence.” This type of leader (a great quarterback, a heroic battlefield commander) is one who exerts great influence by excelling in activities that are admired by followers. What I found interesting about these results was that cadets seemed to think about leadership in the same way as ancient Greek warriors. They were influenced by leaders of authority (the Agamemnon model of leadership) and by leaders of excellence (the Achilles model of leadership).