

Book Review

***Leaders eat last* by Simon Sinek: Book review**

Robyn Millar, MLS  
Stevens-Henager College

---



Journal of Online Higher Education

ISSN: 2575-1204

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

---

I loathe to admit it, but I judged *Leaders Eat Last* by its cover. That goes against all kinds of advice I have given others, both in my personal life and as a librarian. My initial impression of this audiobook was not promising in that the artwork on the cover didn't grab my attention and the case from the public library, from which it was borrowed, was battered. But the person giving it to me was persistent: "Really, this is great stuff! You have to listen to it!" Reluctantly, I put the first disc in my car's CD player. If it didn't catch my attention by the end of my first commute, I was going to switch it out for something else. Within minutes, though, the friendly, conversational tone that Simon Sinek used to talk about leadership impressed me. Sinek's message to his readers is that everyone has power to influence the people in our lives when we intentionally develop our leadership skills. In *Leaders Eat Last*, Sinek describes leadership that creates authenticity between words and actions and the information in this book, if applied diligently, could change your life.

Sinek uses relatable examples demonstrating what exemplary leadership practices are and how they are manifested. He describes the sacrificial intervention by Captain Mike Drowley (aka Johnny Bravo) with his A-10 aircraft that allowed 22 members of the Special Operations Forces to live through an enemy attack in Afghanistan. But the leadership lessons are also aimed at situations that are understood by people other than military members. Sinek relates how both trust and morale were boosted when the new CEO of HayssenSandiacre began to treat his employees as real people instead of only as assets to be managed. The majority of the book is an in-depth discussion of how hormones and neurotransmitters have influenced the evolution of human societies. He discusses how establishing "circles of safety" benefits everyone in the society and reveals how to create them. Sinek (2017) explains:

It should be the goal of leadership to set a culture free of danger from each other. And the way to do that is by giving people a sense of belonging...leadership reduces the threats people feel inside the group, which frees them up to focus more time and energy to protect the organization from the constant dangers outside.... Without a circle of safety, people are forced to spend too much time and energy protecting themselves from each other (pp. 26–27).

The backdrop for the title of *Leaders Eat Last* is best understood and seen in a military chow hall. Here, Soldiers of higher ranks make sure the junior military members within their supervision are receiving their food first. But the concept of allowing the younger members to

---

eat first goes beyond food. It is perpetual in that leaders take care of the needs of their team, with the knowledge that their own personal needs will be met by their respective leaders as well.

One example of Sinek's circle of safety is the mention of an incredible policy at tech company Next Jump: lifetime employment. The only two reasons that employees are asked to leave Next Jump are in cases of moral code violations and instances of actively undermining co-workers. One top engineer at the company wasn't fearful for his job, but the side benefits of the creation of this circle of safety surprised him. After the policy was implemented, his team started communicating much more openly. He found that "mistakes and problems were pointed out more quickly, long before they escalated. Information sharing and cooperation increased too. Simply because his team no longer feared for their jobs, the group leader saw the performance of his team skyrocket" (Sinek, 2017, p. 74).

Leadership is essential for every role in higher education, both in online institutions and traditional college campuses. It is important to recognize that leadership is not management and therefore is not limited to only those in administration. Leadership is self-control and an all-in commitment for your team. Leadership is revealed when employees think about their actions at work in the terms of "we" and "us" instead of the individual mindset of "me" and "I." When leadership is exhibited by every employee, organizations move forward smoothly and purposefully.

While leadership principles are definitely taught in college classes, it is much more powerful for students to see their instructors living and practicing leadership right in front of them. During these first few months of 2020, with the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic, a sizeable opportunity was presented for college instructors to provide leadership. In essence, all college instructors—even if they were previously attached to a fixed ground campus—were catapulted into the online teaching model. Being thrown into this situation revealed to students which instructors had the flexibility to adapt. Flexibility in work environments is a soft skill that crucial for college students to learn, because there is no question *if* the professional world will be unpredictable, but *to what degree* will the professional world be unpredictable. When new graduates are presented with unpredictable situations, they will understandably try to recall a similar situation they have witnessed recently. If students have seen their instructors leading the way in not only teaching soft skills (such as in the college I work for, which puts a high emphasis on teaching soft skills to our students), but also *demonstrating* these skills, students will be better

---

able to model themselves after what their instructors did. Since the higher education institution is the last environment before students enter the professional world, it is therefore crucial for student outcomes that higher education institutions implement leadership.

Sinek has taken his message of leadership development to many venues. During a presentation he gave at the annual Adobe 99U conference, Sinek recounts that leaders are not born, but are made:

Leadership is not a rank. Leadership is not a position. Leadership is a decision. Leadership is a choice. It has nothing to do with your position in your organization. If you decide to look after the person to the left of you and look after the person to the right of you, you have become the leader.... The more we look after each other, the safer we feel, the more we feel like we belong, and the more we will work together to confront the dangers outside. Do this for others and others will become Johnny Bravo. (99U, 2013, 43:09)

When the education community devotes themselves to learning about leadership, we invest in ourselves and the students we serve. When we personally develop and grow our leadership skills, we become the professionals we wish to become. When we personally use leadership in our exchanges with students, we will light the way for the next generations to create a better future.

---

References

99U. (2013, December 4). *Simon Sinek: Why Leaders Eat Last*. Retrieved from YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReRcHdeUG9Y>

Sinek, S. (2017). *Leaders eat last: Why some teams pull together and others don't*.

Portfolio/Penguin.