Review of Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't

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Abstract

Effective leadership behaviors, whether in healthcare, politics, education, tourism, technology, or any other sector, are pivotal in steering organizations and their workforce towards a meaningful and sustainable future. Regardless of whether leaders are born or made, the consequences of poor leadership can often leave lasting challenges that and have a sense of belonging are difficult to rectify. This book review explores Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't by Simon Sinek, which delves into the importance of effective leadership by exploring significant concepts such as belonging, safety, empathy, cooperation, community, culture, and the creation of workplaces where individuals feel safe and have a sense of belonging. The book's eight sections and 27 chapters cover diverse themes, such as the biological drivers of behavior, the risks of abstract decision-making, and the effects of organizational culture on leadership and team dynamics. To provide a deeper theoretical perspective, I have identified key theories related to each part of the book and included them in an appendix, linking Sinek's practical insights with established scholarly theories and frameworks to enhance the review.

Keywords

Leadership Behavior, Organizational Behavior, Organizational Culture, Workplace Belonging, Team Building, Well-being

Rationale and Importance of the Topic

With the recent election of Donald Trump as the U.S. President in November 2024, leadership discourse has become increasingly significant. Donald J. Trump, who served as the 45th president of the United States from 2017 to 2021, lost the 2020 election to Joe Biden. However, with his victory in the 2024 election, he is set to begin his second term as the 47th president in 2025. The role of a leader today extends beyond merely having a long history in politics or holding high-ranking political positions for decades. In today's world, there is a growing demand for leadership that demonstrates resilience, innovation, prioritizes service, and focuses on problem-solving rather than political longevity or titles. Effective leadership, in this context, involves assembling a strong team dedicated to protecting the interests of the people and enhancing the quality of life for citizens, recognizing that these goals should come before everything else. First published in 2014 and reprinted in 2017, Simon Sinek's Leaders Eat Last remains highly relevant today, offering timely insights into what effective leadership looks like in practice.

The Review of Leaders Eat Last

The book is divided into eight parts, with a total of 27 chapters. It explores why some teams work well together while others fail. Sinek uses real-world examples, including those from military and business contexts.

The book consists of the following eight sections. Sinek's ability to start with a broad picture of us as humans—highlighting our needs and the importance of safety, empathy and responsibility in the first few chapters—sets the tone and expectations. It signals that the book speaks to the human experience, not sugarcoating our potential shortcomings, while brilliantly providing evidence and examples of scholarly research that shed light on our strengths and how weaknesses can be transformed into strengths. These eight sections encompass the 27 chapters within the book.

Part 1: Our Need to Feel Safe

 Sinek begins by addressing the basic human need for safety, linking this to the concept of a "Circle of Safety." He discusses how United States Marines work towards creating a sense of belonging and the role higher-ranking officials play in that process. He argues that when leaders create an environment where people feel safe, they develop a sense of belonging, perform better, and become more innovative. One of the book's strengths, evident from the first section, is that Sinek doesn't sugarcoat his message and speaks in authentic language. An example of this direct, well-balanced, and authentic approach is when he says, "Too many leaders are managing organizations in a way that is costing them money, hurting performance, and damaging people's health" (Sinek, 2017, p.46). Another strength of Sinek's book lies in his ability to combine scholarly literature with his own insights, as evident in the paragraph following the above statement, where he discusses the findings of research conducted by two researchers from the Graduate School of Social Work at Boston College.

Part 2: Powerful Forces

 This part of the book mainly explores the importance of community and cooperation, before delving into the biological drivers of behavior. Sinek discusses how neurochemicals like oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin affect our progress, trust, and cooperation levels. Once again, he combines his own insights with quotes from interviews, such as one with Stephen Colbert, the American writer, producer, and political commentator. Sinek is successful in balancing engaging scholarly literature with discussions that also draw on other sources for knowledge and insights. After all, Leaders Eat Last isn't an academic textbook, and while the author has embraced this distinction, the content of the book can still be of immense value to academic professionals and scholarly researchers.

In Chapter 8 of this section, the title alone—"Why We Have Leaders"—indicates how the book delves into leadership thoughtfully. It seems the author designed the first seven chapters to establish tone, highlight the importance of belonging, safety, teams, community, and our biology, and introduce neurochemicals, all while offering food for thought in an easily digestible manner. Only then does the book dive into what it is essentially about: leadership. Sinek is not afraid to acknowledge and discuss the legacy of Nelson Mandela, nor does he shy away from referencing the FORTUNE 1000 lists and our human tendency to assign leadership ranks. As Sinek puts it, "The reason we love rankings is because we're hierarchical animals, and there are perks to being higher in the pecking order" (Sinek, 2017, p. 87). It is within this

same section that Sinek begins discussing how "Eating Last is Repaid with Loyalty and Hard Work".

Part 3: Reality

This section of the book with two chapters in it "The Courage to Do the Right Thing" and "Destructive Abundance" discusses the importance of moral courage in leadership, emphasizing that real courage in leadership is about making morally right choices, especially when those choices are difficult or unpopular, and standing up for the well-being of people, for the human part of leadership, regardless of the pressures faced. Sinek's ability to illustrate how focusing solely on numbers and metrics, without considering the human context, leads to organizational failure and disengagement is commendable.

Part 4: How We Got Here

This section of the book discusses the cultural and economic evolution of leadership over several decades, highlighting the significant shift from the post-World War II values of shared sacrifice and communal well-being to the self-serving, profit-driven attitudes that emerged with the Baby Boomer generation. In Chapter 12, titled "When Leaders Eat First," I believe Sinek successfully confronts the reader with a crucial issue that many other non-academic leadership books sometimes overlook: the possibility that abundance can sometimes lead to destructive abstraction.

Part 5: The Abstract Challenge

In this section, Sinek discusses the dangers of abstraction in leadership, where decisions are driven by numbers and metrics rather than human connection. He explores the consequences of treating people as mere abstractions and focusing solely on the bottom line. One of the most thought-provoking aspects of this section is how such a mindset can lead leaders to prioritize self-interest over doing what is right. Chapter 15, in particular, he once again emphasizes that "numbers of people aren't people, they're numbers," urging readers to reconsider a leader's responsibility to unite people rather than reduce them to faceless figures.

Part 6: Destructive Abundance

In this section of the book, spanning Chapters 17 to 21, Sinek offers a comprehensive exploration of the differences between organizational cultures, using both positive and negative examples. These chapters examine culture from various angles, with one thought-provoking theme running throughout: Bad Cultures Breed Bad Leaders. This section also complements earlier parts of the book that focused on neurochemicals and the motives behind behavior. Sinek's thoughtful structure and presentation of ideas, combined with a depth and diversity of examples, keep the reader engaged, and is commandable. In Chapter 19, the book again showcases its strength by challenging surface-level leadership discussions that offer a one-size-fits-all approach. Sinek uses the example of leadership on U.S. submarines to highlight this point. He argues that, unlike a nuclear-powered submarine, companies often resort to replacing staff or upgrading technology when things go wrong, assuming this will solve the issues. However, on a submarine, the leader cannot simply force the crew to obey blindly or request a better crew or a more familiar ship. Leadership, in this context, requires shifting from a model of blind obedience to one where every crew member actively thinks and contributes, challenging some of the conventional business leadership approaches.

Part 7: A Society of Addicts

In this part of the book, Sinek argues that we are living in a society of addicts. While addictions to substances like alcohol and cigarettes are more obvious from a biological standpoint, he suggests that we are particularly drawn to the dopamine release associated with performance. This section builds on ideas he introduced earlier in Part 2, Chapter 5. Dr. Anna Lembke's 2021 book Dopamine Nation reinforces many of the points Sinek raised in his work. What initially seemed like a collection of many different concepts throughout the book to me gradually revealed itself to be a well-structured, intentional connection between the sections and chapters up to this point. The elaborations were thoughtfully crafted, ensuring that they neither overwhelmed the reader nor left them feeling lost.

Part 8: Becoming a Leader

The final section of the book begins with a refreshing reintroduction of the core concepts from earlier chapters—safety, cooperation, and trust. As Sinek states, "As animals made for cooperation with a need to trust, too many of us are working in environments that bring out the worst in us" (Sinek, 2017, p. 248). He argues that confronting threats is most effective when approached collectively and emphasizes that leadership is a shared responsibility within a group, not something that rests solely on those at the top. His final reflections align with themes found in both academic and popular discussions of shared responsibility. For example, he references the 12-Step programs, pointing out that few alcoholics in AA achieve sobriety until they reach Step Twelve, which requires them to commit to helping another alcoholic overcome their struggles. Earlier in Part 1, Chapter 2, Sinek writes, "Every single employee is someone's son or someone's daughter. Like a parent, a leader of a company is responsible for their precious lives." This early focus on individual responsibility for leaders smoothly connects to the later discussions on collective accountability, reinforcing one of the book's key strengths: its seamless integration of personal and shared responsibility.

While the book's strengths have been highlighted in the review above, there are a few weaknesses worth noting. Firstly, in Part 1, Sinek mentions a study conducted by two researchers from the Graduate School of Social Work at Boston College, but he fails to provide their names. He writes, "A study by two researchers at the Graduate School of Social Work at Boston College found that a child's sense of well-being is affected less by the long hours their parents put in at work and more by the mood their parents are in when they come home" (Sinek, 2017, p. 46). This omission leaves the reader wondering why the researchers' names weren't included, as it would have been helpful for those who wish to explore the study further. This lack of attribution is a recurring weakness throughout the book. This lack of attribution is a recurring weakness throughout the book. However, one might argue that the book was not intended to follow an academic writing style, which is a valid point to consider.

Secondly, although the book seems aimed at a global audience, it could have benefited from more examples set in other countries, particularly developing nations. For instance, Sinek draws heavily on U.S. military. While this may reflect the book's primary focus on the U.S. market, incorporating a more diverse international perspectives, could have provided more depth and broadened the appeal for readers from different contexts.

A Final Self-Reflection

I learned early in my journey as a sports coach and later during my initial years in academic research and university teaching that leadership is about more than providing direction and instruction—it's about creating a space where people feel they belong, trust each other, and are inspired to contribute. As an educator, I noticed that if I focused solely on directing students and expecting them to follow without fostering this kind of environment, many would lose motivation or, at best, perform tasks mechanically, simply going through the motions. It taught me the value of building connection and empowerment over mere compliance. I came to realize that I needed to unlearn certain habits, reflect on my personal experiences of what made teaching effective for me as a learner, and foster a culture where it wasn't just about me leading, but about all of us co-creating and working together toward success. Leaders Eat Last explores many different concepts and examples, but its central theme remains consistent: a true leader must prioritize team members over personal gain, gratification, and power. While this concept might seem straightforward, it is one of the most difficult to fully embody. Whether this quality can be taught or requires an open heart and mind for its seeds to take root is a question I continue to reflect on in my leadership journey as well as in my coaching and consulting practice.

Conclusion

The book is reasonably rooted in empirical research and real-life examples, such as the military practice where leaders eat last as a sign of taking care of their subordinates. Leaders Eat Last remains a relevant and influential read, especially in times when the quality of leadership is under scrutiny and the world is facing significant leadership challenges, particularly in political agendas where more efforts need to be made to retain sustainable peace globally, or else millions of people will suffer, now and for generations to come. As the book states, "numbers of people aren't people, they're numbers," and the world needs more leaders who are selfless, focus on people, and prioritize their health, safety, belonging, and prosperity, embedding this focus within the culture of their workplaces.

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Appendix A

Theoretical Foundations for Leaders Eat Last with Justifications: Developed by the author

Book part 1-8	Relevant theorietical perspectives and scientific underpinnings with justification
Our Need To Feel Safe	**Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation**: Reflects the basic human need for safety, security, and belonging as discussed by Sinek. (1) (2) **Psychological Safety**: Aligns with the idea that teams perform better when members feel safe to take risks. (3) **Attachment Theory**: While primarily focuses on infacts, it also connects to creating secure relationships in the workplace, fostering trust and belonging. (4) (5)
Powerful Forces	**Behavioral Neuroscience and Neurotransmitter Influence**: Explains neurobiology of components of motivational drive and how neurotransmitters impacts emotions. (6) (7) **Social Exchange Theory**: Supports the idea of community, explains how people interact socially, and how mutual trust as a basis for

	strong team dynamics are built. (8) **Self-Determination Theory**: Highlights the role of intrinsic motivation driven by a sense of belonging and fulfillment. (9)
Reality	**Moral Courage**: Relates to Sinek's emphasis on ethical decision-making in challenging situations. (10) **Ethical Leadership**: Supports the focus on prioritizing moral principles over short-term efficiency. (11) **Theory of Planned Behavior**: Explains the decision-making process influenced by attitudes towards ethical leadership. (12)
How We Got Here	**Shareholder Value Theory**: Explains the historical shift towards prioritizing profits in leadership. (13) **Generational Cohort Theory**: Highlights differences in values between generations, such as Baby Boomers. (14) **Cultural Hegemony**: Connects to the dominance of profit-driven values shaping corporate culture.(15)
The Abstract Challenge	**Dehumanization**: Reflects Sinek's critique of seeing people as numbers, leading to a loss of empathy. (16) **Transactional Leadership Theory**: Connects to Sinek's emphasis on the pitfalls of focusing solely on metrics and results. (17)
Destructive Abundance	**Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB)**: Explains how positive cultural norms encourage discretionary, cooperative behaviors. (18) **Toxic Organizational Culture**: Discusses the detrimental impact of negative cultural practices on leadership. (19) **Competing Values Framework**: Helps explain how different cultural values affect leadership effectiveness. (20) **Social Learning Theory**: Suggests that negative behaviors in a toxic culture are modeled and reinforced by leaders. (21)
A Society Of Addicts	**Dopamine Theory of Addiction**: Relates to the societal focus on short-term rewards and instant gratification. (22) **Conditioning Theory**: Based on the work of Pavlov and Skinner, it describes how repeated exposure to rewarding activities can create addictive patterns. (23)
Becoming A Leader	**Servant Leadership**: Resonates with Sinek's call for leaders to prioritize serving others. (24) **Transformational Leadership Theory**: Reflects the importance of inspiring and motivating team members through shared vision. (25) **Collective Responsibility**: Connects to the idea of shared leadership and responsibility within the team. (26)