

## BOOK REVIEW

# A Review of "Leaders: Myth and Reality"

Stanley McChrystal, Jeff Eggers, & Jason Mangone,  
New York, NY: Penguin Random House (2018)

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“Of all the things I’ve done, the most vital is coordinating those who work with me and aiming their efforts at a certain goal.”

Walt Disney

Retired General Stanley McChrystal offers a fresh way of investigating leaders and the concept of leadership. Although a relatively different interpretation, it does follow his other two books that stress the role of leaders in a process with their followers. The former commander of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), and whose last command was the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Commander, US Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A), asserts that the role of the leader has been misunderstood which establishes the “root cause of the mythology of leadership—its relentless focus on the leader” (p.7). Instead, with the assistance of authors Jeff Eggers, a former-Navy SEAL and member of the White House National Security Staff during the Obama administration, and Jeff Mangone, a former Marine, McChrystal reveals a model that he suggests more efficiently and clearly demonstrates the role of the leader.

McChrystal’s inspiration derives from *Plutarch’s Lives*. Similar to the Greek historian, McChrystal provides concise biographies on the lives of thirteen personalities, versus Plutarch’s 48, in order to show the true complexity of leaders and the leadership they provide. Through the examination of his once-hero, Robert E. Lee, and the six pairings of other individuals who he views as leaders—the inclusion of his former enemy, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is certainly surprising—he effectively demonstrates the need for his new interpretation. The eclectic choices of personalities certainly makes for an interesting read, especially if one thought he would solely focus on military figures. He profiles Walt Disney and Coco Chanel as “The Founders,” Albert Einstein and Leonard Bernstein as “The Geniuses,” Maximilien Robespierre and al-Zarqawi as “The Zealots,” Zheng He and Harriet Tubman as “The Heroes,” “Boss” Tweed and Margaret Thatcher as “The Power Brokers,” and Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. as “The Reformers.” Using basic biographies, McChrystal identifies the diversity and flaws of leaders, revealing that context and how these leaders influenced their followers, or vice-versa in many cases, was more essential to the synergy of leadership. Additionally, the authors emphasize that not all leaders are successful or moral.

The authors fashion three common myths regarding leadership:

1. The *Formulaic* myth that emphasizes a static checklist containing those traits for others to emulate to be a good leader, which neglects any input from the follower or context. As the authors state, “This first essential flaw in the mythology of leadership is our quest for something that can be boiled down to a prescriptive theory, or an equation with fixed coefficients” (p. 373).
2. The *Attribution* myth, which highlights the leader and his/her abilities, ignoring, once again, the contributions and agency of those surrounding the leader, or the leader’s inherent flaws. Again, the “Rose coloring [of leaders’ lives]...introduces romantic and myopic distortions” (p. 375).
3. The *Results* myth, where focus is on the leader’s goal-oriented outcomes and achievements. This myth disregards the complexity of what leaders should provide. Instead, “The truth is that when we look closely, we see leadership as much in what our leaders symbolize as in what they accomplish” (p. 378).

As an alternative, the authors would like us to change the lens of how we view leaders and leadership. As they uncover, the common structure of viewing leaders, and the leadership they provide, is where the leader is on the apex, offers his/her leadership, which influences the followers in some type of context that produces some type of result(s). And this result should be “success.” This is the myth that needs a dose of reality. He insists that we require a different picture. What is deemed more effective—the reality—is visualized more like an interface proposed in Clausewitz’s remarkable trinity where context, followers, and the leader effectively collaborate in a dynamic, interactive system, with the product of leadership as the result. He also includes a basic schematic with some definitions later in the book. In offering this model, and using the varied personalities in the book to support this model, McChrystal has validated his own experience that leadership is most certainly situational—there is no formula. For many this may not be the panacea desired, but it is the reality. Through his discussion of the myths of leaders and leadership, McChrystal presents the pitfalls of leader-focused work, and reveals a better method of envisioning the process.