

*Leaders Eat Last*: Book Review and Critique

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**Book Overview**

Using the backdrop of real-life leadership examples, Simon Sinek's *Leaders Eat Last* is a guide to leadership in the real world, in all types of scenarios, both in and outside the office environment. As the book's forward explains, "Simon Sinek does not propose any new leadership theory or core principle" (Sinek, 2019, xi). Instead, the goal of this leadership text is to better explain the dynamics of a group and illustrate how the leader is responsible for their followers feeling protected, safe and empowered to reach the team's goals. Sinek's background is diverse in multiple respects, from his professional life to his childhood. His appreciation for diverse leadership settings is seen throughout the book, as he discusses leadership in many setting, most of which are outside of the business realm. It's not difficult to get hooked within the first half page of Sinek's book; he opens as he does every chapter, with a contemporary example of a leader in practice. In these first pages, the leader is Captain Mike Drowley, a member of the Special Ops team serving in Afghanistan less than one year after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Using this same framework in each chapter, Sinek discusses the ways that teams can function best through the work of their leaders.

One of the base concepts that appears throughout the book is the Circle of Safety, depicted in a Chapter Three drawing as the safe place one resides, away from danger. As Sinek (2019) writes, "Without a Circle of Safety, people are forced to spend too much time and energy protecting themselves from each other" (p. 27). The book continues with this concept throughout, going on to explain the biological explanations behind this theory and why they function best in groups as a team. Sinek not only touches on the chemicals in the body that make people behave the way they do, but he also explains how humans have been biologically designed to work well in a community with a focus on survival at all times.

Sinek's chapters go through various struggles in today's leadership environments, the way leaders have come to see people as abstract, and even how the team culture is influenced by the leader. Rather than discussing specific leadership theories by name, *Leaders Eat Last* details the ways groups can be successful, with strong leaders who know their team and, as one chapter titles it, "lead the people, not the numbers" (2019, p. 209). After Sinek provides a brief background of the body's chemicals, he provides five lessons for the reader, all directed at how a leader creates and maintains the best culture in their team so that productivity is at its highest. The concluding chapters of the book touches on various issues in today's leadership, such as the addiction to performance and the leader's lack of accountability for the issues at hand. These final chapters continue the approach Sinek has used throughout the book by placing leaders in the world in which they live, encouraging them to lead from where they are. *Leaders Eat Last* (2019) ends as it began, with the desire "to do little things for the good of others... one day at a time" (p. 288).

### **Evaluation of the Book**

*Leaders Eat Last*, as the cover indicates, was a *New York Times* bestseller and it is not hard to see why after finishing the first chapter. The book is approachable in its discussion of leadership, so it truly is a book for the leader not fluent in leadership theory. Each chapter opens with an example of a successful or poor leader from real life, which provides the background for the concepts Sinek presents thereafter. Whether it's the Special Ops pilot in Afghanistan, a heroic air traffic controller willing to break the rules or even the senior partner at Goldman Sachs, this book offers a quick, enjoyable read about the culture of leadership. The goal of this book was to make the world a better place through leadership and *Leaders Eat Last* attempts to do this by placing leadership in contexts about which the reader cares. In an interview with

CNBC, Sinek explains his hope for the world saying, “I... want to live in a world in which people feel happy at work” (Montag, 2017). This book reads from that perspective of hope beginning on page one.

At times, Sinek’s book seems a bit unorganized, jumping from the biological chemicals involved in goals to a brief history of the Baby Boomers’ impact on work culture in the United States. Leadership is a topic that can cover many different subtopics, so organization and clarity in the layout of a book is important; this is something the reader may miss in this one leadership book. The real value in the book seems to be the five leadership lessons Sinek discusses. Each chapter draws the reader in with anecdotal examples of good and bad leaders, but the organization is somewhat lacking and leaves the reader feeling overwhelmed with content. Conversely, Sinek does a great job of expressing how and why followers follow, making sometimes complex theory ideas very simple for the average reader. For example, Sinek (2019) explains why followers choose to support their leader saying, “We work to advance the vision of a leader who inspires us and we work to undermine a dictator who means to control us” (p. 173). This book works to balance the approachable nature of its writing with the need for organization in content and does so successfully at times, but it remains a struggle throughout.

Sinek is not shy about placing much of the burden of a successful team on the leader, but he does a good job of offering a balance between examples of both good and bad leaders in mainstream society. In Chapter Two, the author argues that leaders who focus too much on their own wealth begin to act like tyrants. Referring to his Circle of Safety metaphor again, Sinek explains that when distance is created by the leader, the employees become an abstract idea, not people to recognize as a part of meeting a goal. The leader, then, has created a culture in which those inside the organization are competing against one another, instead of feeling safe and

working to compete against outside forces. The chapter goes on to explain that it is the leader's responsibility to be empower "everyone to think, not just do" (Sinek, 2019, p. 180). The scholar reading this book may question the full responsibility Sinek places on the leader, when one considers such leadership theories as the situational approach that recognizes the follower's role in the relationship (Northouse, p. 95). When describing a career submariner's work with their team, he writes, "It is a leader's job... to take responsibility for the success of each member of his crew" (p. 181). The scholar reading *Leaders Eat Last* may question the base of this argument, when they consider that a goal is met through the actions of both the leader and the followers.

Sinek's writing can be best described as approachable and enthusiastic towards the potential of what leaders can do for the world. Although some of it may seem obvious, Sinek's chapters on integrity and the need for friendships in teams is insightful. When he discusses relationships in teams, he does not forget about the way technology has changed these relationships. There is value in the fact that Sinek addresses the way leaders have changed over time due to technological advances and the corresponding time periods. However, there is a lack of global perspective in this book, which is shocking given Sinek's background. Even though Sinek grew up in multiple areas of the world, his text is largely American-centered, which detracts from a global discussion of leaders. The value in Sinek's text, though, lies in its down to earth discussion of such topics as group culture and integrity in leadership. He covers seemingly common topics within the field of leadership, but does so in a way that is interesting and useful for the everyday leader. When discussing the topic of integrity in leadership, Sinek could take the typical approach, which explains the dos and don'ts of leaders with integrity. Instead, he opens with a story about a Marine Corp Officer that did something worthy of getting dismissed from boot camp- he fell asleep on the job. In reflecting on this egregious error, Sinek (2019)

says, “Leadership is not a rank worn on a collar. It is a responsibility that hinges almost entirely on character” (p. 187). Northouse (2019) discusses the same topic of integrity in leadership in his chapter about leadership ethics. One reads this section titled “Ethical Leaders are Honest” as almost obvious in its discussion of the need for honesty in leadership. This example is indicative of the way Sinek approaches common leadership topics but does so in a way that a variety of readers can connect to, whether those readers are soldiers or higher education professionals.

The final chapter of the text, titled “A Practical Guide to Leading Millennials” is an addition that one wishes was more fully incorporated in to the book. In his typical style of wanting to better the world through positive leaders, Sinek (2019) opens the appendix section stating, “There is nothing ‘wrong’ with this generation” (p. 289). Next, the section goes in to practical steps not only for the leaders of millennials but for the millennials as well. When thinking about taking full advantage of the millennial employee, he suggests such things as leading by example and talking about the leader’s own failures with them. One may find themselves wishing more of the text was done in this advice type of format. *Leaders Eat Last* brings the topic of leadership to the masses, as Sinek writes in an approachable and understandable style. There is something to say for referencing the theories behind the ideas, though, and many scholars may want more theory dispersed throughout the text. Regardless of the colloquial discussion of leadership, the book is well written with few if any grammatical or editing errors, as is sometimes the case with more pop culture books. It is understandable why Sinek’s *Leaders Eat Last* was on the *New York Times* bestseller list; it is a quick read that allows leaders to consider how they are responsible for the work climate and culture they create for followers.

*Leaders Eat Last* is a good beginning view in to leadership, but this text should not be read by the leadership scholar wanting to engross themselves in theory. Instead, this book is ideal for someone wanting a feel-good approach to how leaders can change the world. Sinek's style is very readable and could be used as a supplemental text to a theory-based approach to leadership. Another suggested audience for this text would be the undergraduate student interested in learning more about leadership. Sinek's anecdotal approach to leadership practices is a perfect way to slowly enter the world of leadership scholarship.

References

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