

Reel Leadership: Hollywood Takes the Leadership Challenge

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Abstract

Movies have mesmerized audiences for years, crossing boundaries of race, gender, age, culture, and nationality. They have also been used to teach people how to lead. One text that zeroes in on the essence of leadership is *The Leadership Challenge*, by Kouzes and Posner (2002). Through their research, they have highlighted five practices of effective leaders. It is our intent to share how we apply movies to teach the tenets of the groundbreaking leadership research of Kouzes and Posner, with proven ideas that work with students of leadership in any setting.

Using movies to teach leadership is a winning strategy; however, diligent planning is required to incorporate them successfully into leadership education. Movies are entertaining, informative, energizing, and educational, if used skillfully. The more facilitators use film, the more skilled they will become and the more the participants will benefit.

Scene One

Americans flock to cineplexes and video/DVD rental houses to be entertained, to escape, to enjoy. Using Hollywood productions to teach leadership offers an appealing way to capitalize on that momentum. Films can provide magic vehicles that move go beyond entertainment, to education. This article explains how teachers can use Hollywood movies to grab an audience, put them into that magic vehicle, and transport them on an educational journey to Leaderville.

We have made Hollywood feature-length movies a staple in our students' diet of leadership lessons. These students range from traditional and nontraditional graduate and undergraduate students, to clients in corporate leadership development training programs, seminars, and workshops.

Feedback from our use of Hollywood movies to teach leadership has been overwhelmingly positive. The only negative comment we hear has been along the lines of "Oh no, don't stop there...can't we please watch just a few more minutes of this one?" That type of response suggests we have given the students just enough, but not too much.

Why Movies?

Our students are predominately adults. Those of us in education, training and/or consulting have experienced first-hand the principles of Androgogy, or the study of how adults learn. Adults learn better when: (1) their individual learning needs and styles are met, (2) their previous knowledge and experience are valued and used, (3) they have active mental and physical participation in the learning activity, and (4) there is a focus on the practical applications of the learning (Sheal, 1989).

One reason people view movies is for enjoyment. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2002) found 76% of workers believe there is less fun at work than there should be. Moviemakers are expert storytellers. Teachers in all settings are turning to storytelling to drive home difficult or complex points about leadership, vision, teamwork, and customer service (Carley, 1999). Wood (2001) suggests films create a useful way to view modern organizations. Seglin has noted, "You can learn some truly useful lessons if you're willing to scratch beneath the surface. Instead of looking at how businesses are portrayed, focus on what the movies have to say about some common management challenges" (Seglin, 2001).

Movie Review

Through our work we know that movies are a powerful way to help students become better leaders. Leadership students praise films concerned with ethical

and personal conflicts, portrayed by realistic characters, who deal with fundamental issues like integrity or trust (Buchanan & Hofman, 2001).

Films portray the human aspects of an organization. “What movies do more than anything else is provide a fictional situation that can be translated into a hypothetical situation in the workplace. They serve as launching pads for discussions about real-life cases” (Higgins, 2003). Movies should be selected for availability, entertainment quality, variety of lessons, quality of leadership lessons, suitability for the audience, and workplace applications (Clemens & Wolff, 1999).

The Leadership Challenge

One text that provides rich opportunities for movie infusion into the leadership learning process is *The Leadership Challenge, 3rd ed. (TLC)*, by Kouzes and Posner (2002). After thousands of cases and interviews with leaders in all walks of life, these authors set forth three findings: (1) leadership can be learned, (2) anyone can learn leadership skills, and (3) leadership development is, ultimately, self-development.

Kouzes and Posner claim we learn about 80% of leadership from experience. One of the overriding lessons in *TLC* is that leadership is not the preserve of a select few—Leadership is everyone’s business (2002). From nearly two decades of research, *TLC* describes five practices essential for effective leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2002):

Practice #1: MODEL THE WAY

- Find your voice by clarifying your personal values.
- Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.

Practice #2: INSPIRE A SHARED VISION

- Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities
- Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.

Practice #3: CHALLENGE THE PROCESS

- Search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow and improve.
- Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes.

Practice #4: ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT

- Foster collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.
- Strengthen others by sharing power and discretion.

Practice #5: ENCOURAGE THE HEART

- Recognize contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.

- Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

Movies Take the Leadership Challenge

Having reviewed the value of movies for learning leadership as well as the leadership lessons from *TLC*, it is time to connect these two areas. The successful integration of movies with *TLC* has several key components. Clemens and Wolff (1999) suggest a successful four-step process of teaching with films: (1) while watching the movie, students take notes; (2) they pair with other participants and share notes; (3) they develop leadership insights from the movie; and, (4) they discuss how to apply those insights at work.

Set-up

It must be assumed that, regardless of the audience experience level or the popularity of the movies used, some participants do not know (or remember) the film. Thus, there must be an appropriate set-up. The set-up should be brief, yet detailed enough to provide adequate perspective and understanding of exactly who the characters are, the specifics of the scene, and any important relationship and personality nuances. When the clip begins, all participants should understand what they are about to view.

Clip

Selecting an appropriate clip requires an understanding of the movie and the scene selected. Show enough of the film to give a clear feel for the application. Know when to stop—showing too much of the film may tend to disengage members; showing too little will not allow adequate understanding of the desired lessons. Once the clip starts, remain quiet and watch.

Debriefing

Allow participants to complete and review their notes. Have two or three broadly applicable open-ended questions for the learning teams to focus on during their discussion time. Let learning teams share their thoughts with the entire group. Finally, reinforce the themes from the movie clips to bring closure to that segment and its associated lessons. Proceed to the next clip, restarting at the Set-up phase.

Sample Movies and Scenes

Table 1 identified films and their associated *TLC* practices that have proved extremely useful for teaching leadership. Here are sample scenes illustrating how this process can work:

***TLC* PRACTICE #1: MODEL THE WAY**

Movie: Schindler's List

1. Set up

Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) is an empathetic factory owner in Nazi Germany. Schindler intends to give Jews work in his factory, so ultimately he can sneak them out of Germany. Though the Jews cannot work as hard as healthy German citizens, Schindler is thinking not of profit, but of saving lives. He must hide his intentions from the Nazi camp commandant (Ralph Fiennes). In this scene, Schindler is supervising the typing of a list by his assistant (Ben Kingsley) officially said to be a set of workers' names but, in reality, the names of the Jewish people he intends to save.

2. Show Clip

From the list generation through the end of the movie where American troops liberate the prisoners. (Approximately 15 minutes)

3. Guided Discussion

1. From your list of "Model the Way" behaviors, what examples from *The Leadership Challenge* do you see in this clip from Schindler's List?
2. How can we incorporate the learning from this clip into our own organizational work lives?

TLC PRACTICE #2: INSPIRE A SHARED VISION

Movie: Field of Dreams

1. Set up

Ray (Kevin Costner) has built a baseball field in an Iowa cornfield. Former baseball player, Shoeless Joe Jackson, enters the playing area where Ray and his wife, Karen, stand. Karen wonders if Joe is a ghost. Joe wonders if he is in Heaven. Ray's answer, "It's Iowa," points out that the characters and people who arrive after them see it as both. It's Heaven because baseball draws together so many Americans, and also because the field is a spiritual meeting place for those with "unfinished business" with loved ones who have passed on.

2. Show Clip

From Ray and Karen's financial discussion at the kitchen table to where Shoeless Joe walks into the cornfield and disappears. (Approximately 12 minutes)

3. Guided Discussion

1. What particular behaviors under “Inspire a Shared Vision” do you see in this clip?
2. In what ways is Ray inspiring?
3. Can you relate yourself to Ray in any way? If so, how?

TLC PRACTICE #3: CHALLENGE THE PROCESS

Movie: Remember the Titans

1. Set up

Coach Boone (Denzel Washington), the rookie head coach of the newly integrated high school football team in northern Virginia, challenges his team to get to know each person of the other race. Until they do, they will undergo two-a-day practices. If they still don't get to know each other, they will go to three-a-days.

2. Show Clip

From Boone's cafeteria challenge to learn about team mates of the opposite race, through the end of Boone's speech by the Gettysburg battlefield. (Approximately 10 minutes)

3. Guided Discussion

1. What behaviors from *The Leadership Challenge* appear in this scene?
2. How can you relate to the turmoil of a new team, with diverse teammates?

TLC PRACTICE #4: ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT

Movie: Twelve Angry Men (original version)

1. Set up

One juror (Henry Fonda) in a murder trial tries to help other jurors consider all the facts and avoid making assumptions. He convinces each juror, one by one, to change his vote.

2. Show Clip

From the first vote through the end of the second round of votes. (Approximately 15 minutes)

3. Guided Discussion

1. How did Fonda's character enable others to act in this clip?

2. In what way can we be like Fonda's character, each day?

TLC PRACTICE #5: ENCOURAGE THE HEART

Movie: Shawshank Redemption

1. Set Up

Andy (Tim Robbins) is serving a life sentence in Shawshank Prison for a murder he did not commit. While there, he has been writing to convince community leaders to send books to improve the library for his fellow inmates. He finally gets money for needed resources.

2. Show Clip

From the arrival of the check for Andy in the warden's office to where the guard breaks into the office to stop the music playing over the camp speakers. (Approximately 7 minutes)

3. Guided Discussion

1. How is this clip an example of "Encouraging the Heart"?
2. What can you take away from this clip and apply to your world?

The Final Scene

Using movies to teach leadership works; however, significant planning is required to incorporate movies successfully into leadership education. Movies must be available, properly formatted, and positioned. They must be shown on equipment that is dependable (a back-up system is a must), and have appropriate screen size for the room and audience. The facilitator must be conversant with the film and guide the discussion to strengthen the connection between film and workplace application.

Now...all quiet on the set....we're ready to roll film....and...***ACTION!***

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Table 1. Five Practices and Sample Movies

| MODEL THE WAY | INSPIRE A SHARED VISION | CHALLENGE THE PROCESS |
|---|---|---|
| <p>A Man for All Seasons Rudy Glory Saving Private Ryan Anna and the King Bridge on the River Kwai Fail Safe Ghandi Gettysburg Das Boot It's a Wonderful Life To Kill a Mockingbird Wall Street Zulu Air Force One Fargo Little Women Schindler's List Twelve O'clock High Twister</p> | <p>Chicken Run Pay It Forward The Perfect Storm Elizabeth Field of Dreams Buggy Braveheart Excalibur Fitzcarraldo</p> | <p>Courage Under Fire Working Girl Secret of My Success Patch Adams Hunt for Red October Lords of Discipline Men of Honor Crimson Tide Moby Dick Roger and Me Norma Rae Apollo 13 Erin Brockovich Elizabeth Field of Dreams</p> |
| ENABLE OTHERS TO ACT | ENCOURAGE THE HEART | |
| <p>Twelve Angry Men (original) Chicken Run Philadelphia Twelve O'clock High Twister Lean on Me Remember the Titans Stand and Deliver Tuskegee Airmen Lord of the Rings The Wizard of Oz Fried Green Tomatoes Gung Ho The Miracle Worker</p> | <p>Chocolat Hoosiers Mr. Holland's Opus Harry Potter Tuskegee Airmen October Sky Dead Poets Society Billy Elliot Shawshank Redemption</p> | |