



Cabell's Listed

BECOMING A JEDI MANAGER THE FORCE AWAKENS THROUGH CLASSIC LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture has been used in management education to illustrate leadership concepts. This paper suggests taking one particular piece of popular culture, the *Star Wars* saga, to analyze the leadership traits of the mystical Jedi. Real-world managers can be informed by their emphasis on mindfulness and mentoring. However, managers must also be wary of over extending self through multi-tasking as well as dwelling on failures for too long as these have been pitfalls of the Jedi. This paper recommends ways in which instructors can explore the topics of mindfulness, mentoring/developing, multi-tasking, and failing while noting some challenges of engaging these topics.

KEYWORDS: *Star Wars*, popular culture, mindfulness, mentoring, multi-tasking, failure, leadership, spirituality

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1. Introduction: “I’m one with the Force, and the Force is with me.” – Chirrut Imwe

The *Star Wars* series, initially created by George Lucas, has become ingrained as part of modern culture around the world. Through its sprawling number of films (at the time of writing the number is ten official movies) to books, comics, and television series, *Star Wars* has emerged as a modern myth that explores the nature of good and evil (McDowell, 2017). As such, its characters can serve as lessons of positive and negative behaviors. Specifically, characters who follow the Jedi way can serve as role models, albeit fictional, to viewers. These characters use the light (i.e. positive/good) side of the “Force” (a mystical energy that both guides and serves those that can feel its presence) as they engage in behaviors. Obi-Wan Kenobi, a Jedi Knight, tells Luke Skywalker, his mentee, in the original 1977 *Star Wars* film *A New Hope* that the Jedi have been “guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy for more than a thousand generations.” Two things are apparent from this

statement. First is that the Jedi are perceived to be a positive and good group of Force users. Second is that they have taken on leadership roles in the galaxy over the past generations.

Therefore, examining the leadership style of members of the Jedi Order can be instructional to would-be organizational managers. Urick and colleagues discuss the role that movies have in influencing behaviors (especially with regard to leadership or managerial roles) and the *Star Wars* series is no exception (Urick, Gnecco, Jackson, Greiner and Sylada, 2015). Though exploring leadership styles and behaviors that occurred “a long time ago in a galaxy far far away” might seem far-fetched, using out-of-the-box examples to teach leadership is not unheard of. For example, Kurke (2004) illustrates leadership with Alexander the Great, Comer (2001) illustrates leadership through *The Lion King*, and Urick and Sprinkle (2014) examine leadership through big band leader Glenn Miller. Thus, taking leadership examples from unique sources (such as *Star*

Wars) can be useful for students who can use these illustrations to consider their own leadership activities. Though fictional and not occurring in a traditional organizational structure, examining leadership through film can be useful to students who might have limited experience in traditional organizations, do not actively seek to work in traditional hierarchical organizations, or are already familiar with the films and thus can relate to the characters.

While there exists a fictional handbook/textbook to guide would-be Jedi knights (Wallace, 2012), *Star Wars* has also already been used to explore and provide insight on other more serious (i.e. non-popular culture) topics such as philosophy and religion (Bortolin, 2012; Jones, 2017), law (e.g. Peters, 2012), media studies (e.g. Shefrin, 2004), and psychology (e.g. Langley 2015). Therefore, it is rational to also examine management and leadership using *Star Wars*.

This article will feature several main themes related to leadership illustrated through the *Star Wars* series, specifically by those characters that are “strong with the Force.” These themes include mindfulness, mentorship, and multi-tasking. I will also discuss that, just like Jedi, managers are also not infallible but need to recover from mistakes. Following a presentation of these concepts, I will discuss how instructors can pedagogically use *Star Wars* in the classroom in a practical manner.

2. Mindfulness: “Your focus determines your reality.” – Qui-Gon Jin

Of importance to the Jedi and to real-world managers is the concept of mindfulness. Mindfulness was discussed quite a bit in popular press books related to leadership and management over the past two decades (such as in Senge’s classic *The Fifth Discipline* initially published in 1990; Senge, 2006). Yet, it has also been examined in academic-based literature on management as well (e.g. Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006).

Jordan and colleagues suggest the mindfulness is related to awareness, attention, and consciousness – all of which are very similar to the quote spoken by Qui-Gon Jin and stated in this section’s heading (Jordan, Messner and Becker, 2009). Awareness (i.e. mindfulness) is about understanding one’s surroundings. Relatedly, Jedi understand their context and how they fit within their environment. Very similarly, leaders need to understand their own personal strengths and weaknesses and how they can leverage them to be an effectively influencer in their environment

(Urick and Sprinkle, 2013, for an example of how big band leader Glenn Miller did this). In the academic literature, mindfulness and awareness are related to improved task performance (Dane, 2011). Thus, becoming mindful helps managers focus on the tasks that are important to their situation and thus improve performance.

Yet, mindfulness is not solely about awareness. It’s also about understanding connectedness. Senge notes the interrelatedness inherent within organizations and their problems (Senge, 2006). Such complexity calls for non-linear thinking (Sheep, Fairhurst and Khazanchi, 2017) and to understand how each person might contribute toward systematic issues. This is related to Yoda’s advice to Luke regarding the interrelatedness of all things (in 1979’s *The Empire Strikes Back*) as well as Luke’s training to Rey when he discusses the Force in all things (in 2017’s *The Last Jedi*), highlighting interrelatedness. As advocated by Urick and colleagues, recognizing the interrelatedness of problems is a big step for managers leading change so that their organizations might be more focused on continuous improvement (Urick, Hisker and Godwin, 2017).

Concepts related to mindfulness are also central to Greenleaf’s servant leadership model (Greenleaf, 2002). In his writing, Greenleaf stresses that leaders not overthink their decisions but instead go with their instinct. Such instincts are developed over time by having a deep understanding of one’s environment. This is akin to the Jedi who “use the Force.” Examples are pervasive throughout the *Star Wars* saga. For example, in 1977’s *A New Hope*, Luke switches off his targeting computer as he attacks the Death Star weapon so he can follow his instinct (at the direction of his mentor Obi-Wan). Similarly, Jedi Master Yoda instructs Luke to “unlearn what he has learned” in order to understand his surroundings more clearly in 1979’s *The Empire Strikes Back* and Obi-Wan instructs Anakin to control his thoughts so that he does not focus on the negative in 2002’s *Attack of the Clones*. Like the Jedi, managers need to understand the interrelatedness and to develop their instincts to navigate complex organizational problems.

3. Mentorship: “Pass on what you have learned.” – Yoda

One particular behavior exhibited by Jedi in nearly every *Star Wars* film is to serve as a mentor or teacher. Much of the *Star Wars* saga concerns mentorship between Jedi: Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, Obi-Wan and Anakin/Luke, Yoda and Luke, Luke and Rey. In these relationships, collective memory of the Jedi are passed down in order to keep

their philosophy intact, just as organizations try to manage knowledge transfer in such a way that incoming organizational members learn the values, culture, and processes of a company from others who are likely to exit sometime in the not too distant future.

Mentorship is a relationship in which a person serves as someone who helps another develop (the mentor) while the other person (mentee) grows from the mentor's experience (Hunt and Michael, 1983). Yet, in these relationships, both the mentor and mentee can learn and stand to gain from the relationship (Langdon, 2014). While much emphasis in the literature has focused on mentors helping mentees develop knowledge related to a certain career or introducing mentees to members of their network (Scandura, 1992), mentorship can also be used to help with emotional coping and psychosocial development (Ismail, Ridzwan, Ibrahim and Ismail, 2015).

In *Star Wars*, some of these relationships are formal (i.e. Anakin is assigned to Obi-Wan by the Jedi Council in 1999's *The Phantom Menace*) while others are informal (i.e. Rey seeks out Luke out of her own volition because she wants to learn in 2017's *The Last Jedi*). They also have varying levels of success. Anakin ultimately does not learn from his training in the "light side" and becomes Darth Vader in 2005's *Revenge of the Sith*. On the other hand, Luke successfully saves the galaxy from the Second Death in 1983's *Return of the Jedi* (with the help of his friends) as a result of his training.

Mentoring and teaching is a fundamental activity of transformational leaders (Bass, 1990) and an activity that real-world managers can learn from fictional Jedi. Kouzes and Posner identify mentorship behavior as "modeling the way" in which organizational members pick up on the actions of managers and follow them (Kouzes and Posner, 2012). So, too, do the effective examples of mentorship in *Star Wars* show evidence of mentees assuming behaviors of their mentors. Of interest in *Star Wars*, mentorship is often intergenerational in nature (Urick, 2016). Such intergenerational mentorship to aid in knowledge transfer and the ultimate success of organizations is crucial in real-world organizations as well (Sprinkle and Urick, 2018).

4. Multi-tasking: "Never with his mind on where he was...what he was doing." – Yoda

Both managers and Jedi are pulled in a lot of different directions. Multi-tasking can be defined as engaging in several different behaviors, jobs, or roles at the same time

(Paposki and Oswald, 2010). Some Jedi become legendary for their ability at multi-tasking. For example, in 2017's *The Last Jedi*, Luke sends a "Force hologram" of himself to confront Kylo Ren while actually on another planet and becomes even more legendary by doing so. Managers who can multi-task effectively are often revered as well (Watson and Strayer, 2010).

Yet, as Yoda notes, there is a danger to not keeping one's mind on the here and now ("where you are and what you are doing"). In the example of Luke, his energy seems to be completely spent after sending his spirit to effectively be in two places at once. There are many dangers that confront managers who try to take on too many tasks including burnout and decreased accuracy in work tasks (Adler and Benbunan-Fich, 2012). Just like the Jedi must find balance with the Force, managers must find balance between taking on too many tasks and not supporting their direct reports.

Multi-tasking can be problematic for at least two reasons. First is that managers (and Jedi) engaging in several activities at once can experience role overload. Role overload occurs when the number of tasks overwhelm one's ability to accomplish them all perhaps due to requiring competing resources needed to complete them (Coverman, 1989). Second is that engaging in a multitude of tasks takes away one's ability to be reflective and mindful – states of mind that were suggested in the previous section.

Yet, managers often are expected to wear many hats, put out fires, and overextend themselves so much so that their stress has become an important concern in the workplace (Albrecht, 2010). Managers, therefore, must seek out opportunities to de-stress including engaging in meditation and other more spiritual exercises (Petchsawang and Duchon, 2010) to try and increase mindfulness. More on this will be noted below.

5. Jedi Managers Aren't Perfect: "The greatest teacher, failure is." – Yoda

Aside from drifting to the "dark side" of management from time to time and engaging in too much multi-tasking, managers are imperfect in other ways which causes them to fail or be ineffective. Jedi are not perfect, either, so hopefully employees can overlook some of their managers' faults as well. The Jedi, allowed for the rise of the Emperor and Darth Vader due to their inability to read their context well (in *Revenge of the Sith* from 2005). Ultimately, because of an inability to pass down the Jedi way effectively, Luke

went into hiding which also helped give rise to the First Order (in *The Last Jedi* from 2017).

Some failure results from repression of emotion which was taught by the Jedi Order. In the prequel trilogy, Anakin is forced to keep his emotions toward his romantic love interest Padme secret – in essence exhibiting emotional labor which leads to burnout (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002). Such burnout forces Anakin to turn from the Jedi path toward the dark side which, as *Star Wars* fans know, has devastating repercussions for the galaxy.

However, just as the Jedi tried to train future generations to right galactic wrongs, so must managers train the next generation of the workforce. In the *Star Wars* saga, for all of their wisdom, Jedi such as Luke, Obi-Wan, and Yoda seem to hide after recognizing their failings. Yet, doing so made galactic matters worse as this cemented the rise of the Empire and the First Order. Managers have a responsibility to continue to train and develop others in their organization, even when they themselves might have failed in the past. They have a responsibility to be present in the workplace. “Laissez faire” behavior, or lack of leadership, in which a manager seemingly disengages results in a variety of negative workplace outcomes including role ambiguity of others in the workplace and stress (Skogstad, Hetland, Glaso and Einarsen, 2014). Thus, it is important for managers to be present and mentor others in the workplace.

6. Discussion: “You’ve taken your first step into a larger world.” – Obi-Wan Kenobi

6.1. The Pedagogical Menace

While the above discussion advocates that managers become more mindful, mentor others, avoid overextending self, and not dwell on failures (in essence, allowing managers to “take a first step into a larger world” by reexamining important leadership activities), it may be difficult to educate managers and business students in these areas. Though it is fruitful to use movies as illustrations of management concepts (Sprinkle and Urick, 2016), due to the sprawling nature of the *Star Wars* franchise, showing these films in their entirety to illustrate concepts might not be the best use of training or class time. If an instructor were to show one film it would be best to leverage *The Last Jedi* (2017) as it highlights mindfulness, mentoring, multi-tasking, and failures.

However, if this is the approach that is taken, it will be most effective to provide participants with a brief lecture

prior to watching the film and provide them with a hand-out with probing questions (related to the film and leadership theories) that they can take notes on while viewing the film. Then, following watching the film, participants engage in an instructor-led discussion drawing on their notes. In this discussion, the instructor should draw out how the lessons from the film can be applied to each participant’s own personal situation (Sprinkle and Urick, 2016).

However, showing an entire movie might not be practical in many pedagogical instances. Instructors could select specific scenes to show that they feel best represent some of the concepts they hope to discuss with participants. However, in doing so, participants will miss out on the complexity and overlapping themes that are pervasive throughout the entire movie (or series).

Alternatively, instructors could describe how certain scenes relate to leadership concepts, much in the same way that was done in the previous sections. However, instructors must be careful that their description is clear enough for participants who might not be familiar with the series as this approach seems to assume that participants have some knowledge of the *Star Wars* saga. Such a presentation of the scenes to represent leadership will be ineffective if participants cannot relate to the concepts. Providing students with clear takeaways of leadership ideas that they can apply to their own life is, of course, the most important outcome of leadership/management education.

Perhaps instructors could assign the film(s) for students to view outside of a formal class or training setting. Instructors could present leadership ideas briefly, assign the movie(s), and, upon participants watching, could lead a discussion on the film(s) and draw connections to their own experiences. This approach, however, is also problematic in that participants might perceive this assignment as unnecessary or a waste of time and thus might not do it.

Perhaps, then, the best approach is to just focus on training managers and students in the areas noted above without leveraging *Star Wars* at all. Though this paper used *Star Wars* to illustrate the importance of some leadership behaviors, now that their importance has been illustrated using an “out of this world” example to instructors who read this article, instructors could take this emphasis to inform their focus in the classroom and training events using whatever means they find most appropriate. Instructors could leverage other real world or fictional examples in their approach while still emphasizing the importance of mindfulness, mentorship/

development, problems with multi-tasking, and recovering from failure.

6.2. Classic Leadership Concepts Strike Back

In crafting a course or workshop to cover the areas of mindfulness, mentorship/development, problems with multi-tasking, and recovering from failure as noted above, instructors might draw from a variety of readings. Depending on the nature of the session (i.e. if it is a formal for-credit class, for example), instructors might require students to engage in some substantial reading. Classic practitioner-oriented works suitable to a master's in business program were cited throughout the above (alongside relevant academic work). Some of these include Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (2006), Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership* (2002), and Kouzes and Posner's *The Leadership Challenge* (2012) among others. Because this article cites more recent editions of these works, they deceptively look as though they were published within the past 15 years. However, these three books have been around for decades (in the case of *Servant Leadership*, over 40 years!). Yet, it seems as though some leadership programs have overlooked such classics of late. This paper is a call to go back and mine some of these (and other) leadership classics that are still useful. Drawing on these writings in leadership development programs is logical – they have undergone several revisions noting their sustained relevance. Furthermore, though academic research has advanced theories that these works represent, using these texts is an easy way to introduce the basic concepts of mindfulness, mentorship, multi-tasking, and failing. For any more recent developments or nuances advanced by more recent academic studies, instructors could draw on later academic research in their lectures or discussions.

Master's level business courses often rely on practitioner-oriented popular press management books in the readings that professors assign and several of use are suggested above. However, it might also be useful to ask students to read other books or articles on leadership that they identify on their own. Instructors could limit these articles to those related to the crucial "Jedi management" topics noted above. Alternatively and additionally, students could

apply what they learned from their reading to viewing *Star Wars* or other movies during class discussions so that these films could serve as additional examples illustrating the phenomena about which they have read.

7. Conclusion: Return of the Jedi Manager

This paper is an attempt to bring mindfulness and mentorship as well as the pitfalls of multi-tasking and not recovering after failure into the forefront of management education. Taken together, these concepts clearly relate to spirituality. For example, in his latest encyclical (2015), Catholic religious leader Pope Francis emphasizes the interconnectedness in all things (i.e. related to mindfulness noted above) and his statements can be used to inform a management audience (Urick, Hisker and Godwin, 2017). Furthermore, many of the major world religions emphasize the importance of meditation and mindfulness (Smith, 2009). While some academics have picked up on relating religion and spirituality to management, not many formal management courses have picked up on this relationship. Perhaps, through using *Star Wars* as a management educational vehicle, some discussions on the importance of spirituality for managers could emerge in the classroom. After all, "Jedi" is a form of religion or spirituality in the *Star Wars* galaxy.

Similarly, many management training events and courses seem to ignore that managers can fail in their tasks. They offer little to no reassurance that managers need to pick themselves up and trudge on or, as illustrated in *Star Wars*, their group, organization, or galaxy could experience devastating results. Therefore, this paper also serves as a recommendation that formal management education provides guidance and support for managers that fail.

This paper has suggested using popular culture, in this case the *Star Wars* series, to help educate leaders and managers. Of particular importance, the concepts of mindfulness, mentoring, multi-tasking risks, and management failings should be emphasized in leadership education. By leveraging some classic leadership texts noted above and re-emphasizing some of their overlooked concepts, organizations may see a disturbance in the Force as Jedi managers return.

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