

# SUMMARY

## LEADERSHIP IS AN ART

**MAX DE PREE**



# **Summary of “Leadership is an Art” by Max De Pree**

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Become an Artful Leader and Lead Your Employees  
and Company to Success

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# Introduction

We often think of leaders as the rude bosses we see in the movies. The boss is often intimidating and is never happy with his employees, he often runs his company by barking orders and uses scare tactics to get things done. But is being rude and intimidating the mark of a good leader? No. In fact, good leadership is vastly different from this *evil boss* archetype. The first characteristic of a leader is being able to pinpoint the diversity of people's gifts, talents, and skills. When you understand and accept diversity, you enable yourself to see that each person is needed, and you recognize that you don't and can't *know everything*. When we recognize diversity, we can connect a variety of gifts that people bring to the organization, and it is the art of leadership that lies in polishing, liberating, and enabling those gifts.

So what exactly is leadership? Well, leadership is quite difficult to explain. For example, a friend of author Max De Pree explains leadership like this: "Leaders don't inflict pain; they bear pain." Additionally, the mark of a good leader is not through the quality of the head, but the tone of the body. In other words, we must look at the leader's followers to pinpoint the signs of a good leader. Are they learning? Are they reaching their full potential? Do they change with grace? Manage conflict? To determine a true leader is to look at the success of his or her followers. Lastly, the concept of leadership is all about serving: serving the organization, serving the people, and thinking about leadership as stewardship rather than ownership. So if you want to learn more about how you can serve as a leader, then let's get started.



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# The Art of Leadership Begins With Participative Management

The art of leadership requires us to think about leadership in terms of relationships. In fact, the thing we all want most out of our work is effective, productive relationships. This is where participative management comes in and requires leaders to think about the various gifts that people bring to organizations. Furthermore, it means making decisions that are not arbitrary, made in secret, or closed to questioning. It means everyone has a say.

You see, a leader's job is to foster environments where people can develop high-quality relationships, not only with each other but with clients and customers as well. So how can a leader help turn these ideal relationships into reality? Well, there isn't a one-size-fits-all formula, but luckily, there are five steps that you can use as a starting point. The first step is to *respect people*. This means understanding the diversity of everyone's gifts and recognizing each person's strengths. "Everyone comes with certain gifts - but not the same gifts." True leadership allows these gifts to be expressed in different ways and at different times.

The next step is to *understand that what we believe precedes policy and practice*. In other words, many managers are concerned with their management style when they should be concerned with their personal value system. When you focus on both personal and corporate values, your management style emerges as a result of what you believe in and of what is in your heart. Next, *agree on the rights of work*. Each person in a company, no matter his rank in the hierarchy, has the same rights: to be needed, to be involved, to be accountable, and to make a commitment. Once you agree on these rights, you can lead others to become the best version of themselves.

Next, *understand the respective role and relationship of contractual agreements and covenants*. Contractual agreements are those that cover things like expectations, objectives, compensation, working conditions,

benefits, etc. While all of this is needed, there is more to it than simply giving great pay and benefits. In today's world, people can find these contractual agreements at almost any company, so why do they choose to work with you? Well, they don't need contracts, they need covenants. A covenantal relationship is one in which you truly care. For example, a waitress who truly wants the customer to enjoy her meal forms a covenantal relationship with that customer. And when coworkers have a covenantal relationship, they genuinely enjoy working with one another.

Finally, you must *understand that relationships count more than structure*. In other words, when you focus on relationships, you create trust between you and your employees. This trust has nothing to do with the structure of your company but everything to do with the people inside of it. Trust comes from communication, and a good leader listens to what employees have to say. Even more, they give them all the information they need. In fact, it's better for employees to have too much information rather than too little. Ultimately, you should focus on relationships, build trust, and respect others to become a genuinely good leader.



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# Good Leaders Must Strive for Roving Leadership

In the last chapter, we discussed the qualities of a good leader. While it's important that leaders focus on relationships and trust, they should also engage in roving leadership. This means that a hierarchy is unnecessary. You see, sometimes those at the top of the hierarchy are unable to respond swiftly and decisively and must break custom and allow others to be leaders when necessary.

For example, one Easter Sunday morning, a large church was filled with people awaiting the morning's message. However, as the organist struck the first chord, a middle-aged man suddenly stopped breathing and toppled over onto his daughter sitting next to him. The people at the top of the hierarchy, the pastors, organists, and choirs, did nothing. Instead, a young paramedic from the congregation was immediately at the man's side opening his airways and restoring his breathing. Then, six other men lifted him carefully and quickly to the back of the church. Two doctors from the congregation then stepped in until paramedics arrived. In the end, the man suffered an allergic reaction and recovered. But it wasn't the people at the top of the hierarchy that saved the day, it was those we call *roving leaders*.

Roving leaders are the indispensable people in our lives who are there when we need them. They take charge, in varying degrees, every day and they are a key element in the success of companies. As a hierarchical leader, it is your job to identify the roving leaders, then to support them and allow them to lead, when needed. It may not be easy to let someone else take the lead, in fact, to do this requires a special ability to recognize what is best for the organization.

Roving leadership allows everyone in the company to share ownership of problems and requires a great deal of trust and interdependence. It means that employees share in the problems of the company and must be able to count on another person's competence and strengths. When this happens,



you begin to think about each person as an individual and recognize how everyone is needed for their unique strengths and perspectives. When you work by yourself, you suffer incredible limitations, but together, you can become something wonderful.



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# Good Leaders Must Create an Inclusive Capitalist System

In addition to roving leadership, good leaders must also understand the problems within a capitalist system. Perhaps one of the greatest problems with this system is that it is primarily an exclusive one. It's been built around contractual relationships, not covenantal ones, and most people never get the opportunity to be meaningfully involved in the working of the system. Even worse, employees typically take orders from the top and are paid drastically lower wages in comparison to those they take orders from. As a result, workers are often unsatisfied and frustrated.

Well, a good leader must create an *inclusive* environment versus an exclusive one. In inclusive environments, people become healthier, happier, and more creative. But to create an inclusive system, we must become insiders and realize that we are interdependent, we cannot be productive by ourselves. Some marks of feeling included are: being needed, being involved, being cared about as an individual, fair wages and benefits, having the opportunity to do one's best, having the opportunity to understand, and having a piece of the action - like productivity gains, profit sharing, or ownership appreciation.

Each person must feel included as they each play an integral role in developing and maintaining the system. This is called inclusive capitalism, and for it to work, it needs intimacy. For instance, a good restaurant can never be successful if managers don't create relationships with employees and customers. Take the story of the young man who went to his usual spot for lunch one day and it was unusually busy. He sat down and was given a menu, but didn't see the waitress again for another hour! With his lunch hour now gone, he mentioned what happened to the cashier as he walked out the door and simply went back to work.

That night, the owner of the restaurant unexpectedly showed up at the young man's house with dinner - enough dinner for two nights. This is

intimacy, and it is based on caring and understanding. So how can you create workplace intimacy? Well, as we mentioned in a previous chapter, covenantal relationships are those based on intimacy and care. To begin building and nurturing intimacy, you should begin to ask questions and search for answers. Who are the people and what are their relationships with one another? How does the company deal with change and conflict? And most importantly, what is their vision of the future?

Leaders must think about these questions. The goal is that when people both inside and outside the company look at the company, they don't see a corporation, but a group of people working intimately within a covenantal relationship.



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# **Good Leaders Recognize the Importance of Tribal Storytellers and Merge Employees with Owners**

A man named Dr. Carl Frost was once in Nigeria during the late sixties where he brought electricity to the village where he and his family were living. Each family received a single light bulb for their hut and became a symbol for progress. However, problems arose when families would simply sit in their huts at night in awe of this wonderful symbol of technology. No longer did they cooperate in their customary nighttime gatherings by the tribal fire where tribal storytellers would pass along the history of the tribe. As a result, the tribe began losing its history to a few electric bulbs.

This simply illustrates the importance of storytelling. In every family, college, corporation, and institution, storytellers are essential to maintain its history. For example, Herman Miller has a history of being a company where people work together to make a difference. Its values are one of the biggest reasons it has become as successful as it has. The first is that they are a research-driven product company, not market-driven. This means that they rely on an honest examination of their problems to design products that aim to solve those problems.

Furthermore, they are dedicated to quality. Of course, they aren't just talking about the quality of a product or service, but the quality of their relationships, communications, and promises to each other. Ultimately, Herman Miller has a set of values that they must uphold in everything they do; they have a history that guides their future. You see, every company has tribal stories, and while there may only be a few tribal storytellers, it is up to everyone to remember that unimportant things, like manuals or lightbulbs, won't replace their history.

Corporations not only have a history but also three categories of owners. They have those that simply invest cash in the business, those that work for

and invest their lives into the corporation, and lastly, they have those that invest a special skill or talent and have a strong, part-time commitment to the corporation. Typically, these owners have separate roles in the company, at Herman Miller, however, owners and employees are all the same! That's because Herman Miller is one of the few public companies where 100% of full-time regular employees are also stockholders. By merging the two roles, they brought their employees a sense of responsibility and provided them with rewards.

When companies give their employees stock, employees become more motivated to generate profits, which in turn, helps the company thrive. In other words, they are breaking down the exclusive capitalist system and creating an inclusive system where employees and owners merge together and eliminate the traditional hierarchy system.



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# Good Leaders Rely on Communication and Elegance

One of the most vital aspects of any organization is healthy communication. Just as any relationship requires honest and open communication to stay healthy, so the relationships within corporations improve when information is shared accurately and freely. So what is good communication? Good communication is the way people bridge the gaps formed by a growing company, it is the way they stay in touch, build trust, ask for help, monitor performance, and share their vision.

The best way to communicate is through action. You see, a corporation's values are its life's blood, so when you actively practice those values, you are communicating the company's values in a way that people can clearly see and understand. As a result, others will follow and continue to communicate those values through their everyday actions. Not only must a leader communicate effectively, but he or she must also possess *elegance*. And no, elegance isn't simply dressing in expensive designer suits and acting sophisticated. Instead, the marks of elegance go much deeper.

Once on vacation in England and Scotland, author Max De Pree and his friend were debating whether they were driving along the English Channel or the Falmouth Estuary. When they saw two women up ahead, they decided to stop and ask them to settle the debate. When they asked, "Excuse me, ma'am, is that the English Channel?" She simply responded, "Well, that's *part* of it." This story simply illustrates how oftentimes we only look at parts, instead of considering an entire whole. When we look at employees, we struggle to see all the different sides of people. An elegant leader, however, reaches for completeness.

For example, contracts, as we have mentioned, are just a small part of relationships. A complete relationship needs a covenant. Furthermore, an elegant leader recognizes that decisions must be made carefully and thoughtfully. Instead of rushing to make impulsive decisions, an elegant

leader will analyze the situation before agreeing to develop a new product or hiring a new vice president. When Herman Miller was in the process of hiring a new vice president, De Pree understood the significance of a VP to both the organization and its employees. For this reason, De Pree created in-depth checklists that the corporation required from its leader when making such a decision.

These checklists included things like, “is open to contrary opinion,” “is intimate with the organization and its work,” “can be a tribal storyteller,” and that the candidate must understand and speak for “the corporate value system,” and “participative management.” De Pree then sent out the checklists and received feedback and additions. In the end, the company collaborated with one another and took their time before hiring a new vice president. Lastly, elegant leadership is also about treating everyone with respect, regardless of their place in the hierarchy. Ultimately, leadership isn’t just about leading a company to success, it’s about leading with kindness, benevolence, and authenticity.



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# Final Summary

Leadership is an art. It's about leading others with compassion and humanity rather than simply using intimidation and scare tactics to get things done. When employees respect management and vice versa, then amazing things can happen. Communication comes easy, people listen to what others have to say, and as a result, employees will feel included and important. So forget the hierarchy and adopt an inclusive system that values each and every person. Recognize the unique role that each person plays and lead by example, and soon you'll see the company benefit in more ways than one.



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