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***Leadership in Middle-Earth: Theories and Applications for Organizations - Exploring Effective Leadership Practices Through Popular Culture* by Michael J. Urick**

**Abstract**

A review of Urick's *Leadership in Middle-Earth* which considers both the appeal and limitations of utilising examples of leadership from Tolkien's legendarium to illustrate academic theory.

[Angels] have an unchangeable being as regards their nature, with changeableness as regards choice; moreover they have changeableness of intelligence, of affections and of places in their own degree. Therefore these are measured by aeviternity which is a mean between eternity and time. *ST I<sup>a</sup> q. 10 a. 5*

Possibly, the introduction of this particular terminology would create further problems, but it seems to me that *some* such refinement would help to clarify the discussion.

Such (admittedly fine) points aside, this is an insightful and important addition to the literature: it is to be highly recommended.

—John Wm. Houghton

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**LEADERSHIP IN MIDDLE-EARTH: THEORIES AND APPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS—EXPLORING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE.** Michael J. Urick. Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021. ISBN 9781800715288. £20.00

MICHAEL URICK'S *LEADERSHIP IN MIDDLE-EARTH* SETS OUT with a clear purpose: to explore effective leadership practices through popular culture and Tolkien's legendarium. Urick considers various aspects of leadership, exemplifying academically supported theories without the burden of academic jargon or terminology. This is, in principle, a useful concept and while it provides an interesting springboard for Tolkien scholars, Urick's work is problematic in its eager mixing of Tolkien's written work with film

adaptations. I propose that this book will be of most use and interest to those in or aspiring to leadership positions with a passing interest in Middle-earth.

The first two chapters lay the groundwork for the book, introducing both its format and organization, in addition to providing background on Tolkien. They provide justification for the use of Tolkien as a model, as well as the use of the words 'leader' and 'lead' in Middle-earth.

Chapter 3, "Leader Emergence and Holding onto Power" begins the exploration of leadership by addressing how characters become leaders. Urick argues that Tolkien believes that "positive leaders do not actively pursue leadership roles out of self-interest" (21)—and this is the potential problem at the heart of this book. Urick is quick to attribute attitudes and beliefs to Tolkien without confirmation in the author's own words. Tolkien's *Letters* is not referenced, nor are Urick's claims supported beyond inference from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. His interpretation may be valid, but it is framed as an assertion by Tolkien rather than Urick; this is Urick's method through much of the book and sits uneasily, at least for this reader.

This aside, the chapter centers around a comparison between Aragorn and Denethor: their seeking of power, servant leadership and leader emergence and effectiveness. This chapter reiterates the message that those who are most fit for positions of power are these who do not actively desire it. Servant leaders, those who "work toward a greater good" (23) are upheld as the most positive leadership figures. One complication this introduces is Urick's discussion of virtue. If the purpose of this book is indeed to provide models for leadership, Urick seems to make sweeping judgements of the qualities which contribute to virtue, which may be less obvious in our real world where good and evil are not set up as distinctly opposing forces. This also ignores that virtue may be contextual and relative to the organization.

From this, chapter 4 considers "Leader Influence." This includes an interesting discussion of bases of power ("ways in which people achieve influence," 30), which considers five bases: referent, expert, legitimate, rewards and coercive power. Urick proceeds to identify characters who illustrate these various bases and particularly focuses on the wizards (Gandalf and Saruman), kings (Aragorn and Thorin) and hobbits (Frodo and Bilbo). The discussion of the wizards and kings is engaging and reflects the growth of multiple bases of power for the characters within their narratives, though the latter discussion of kings perhaps does not account fully for the difference in purpose and style between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

One problem this chapter creates for itself is characterizing Bilbo's volunteering to take the Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. Urick argues that "it is unclear to Bilbo how he would personally benefit himself" (41) yet he still volunteers. I suggest Bilbo is entirely clear how destroying the Ring would

benefit himself (by preserving the Shire and perhaps reducing his guilt at having brought this burden upon Frodo). By attributing complete selflessness to Bilbo, Urick arguably bestows him with overestimated virtue.

“Team Considerations,” the fifth chapter, explores the construction, maintenance and motivation of teams. This is one of the most coherent chapters, and shines an interesting light on the constituent individuals of the fellowship. To enhance team effectiveness, Urick proposes the hobbits Merry and Pippin are included in the fellowship for their potential to grow and their strong relational ties to Frodo and Sam. This neatly encapsulates two elements of selecting a strong team and is further developed through the discussion of mental models. Urick argues that, just as the individuals must have the potential to develop or enhance skills which are useful to the team, so the team can grow into a more unified conception of team purpose and values. Again, this is neatly demonstrated through the various stages of the fellowship. Individual motivations are also considered and Urick stresses the importance of personal goals aligning with team goals through the character of Bilbo and his journey in *The Hobbit*.

Chapter 6 addresses communication; both verbal and behavioral communications are examined and given refreshingly balanced weighting. Verbal communication is addressed through comparing the characters Saruman and Gandalf and is for the most part sound. One small point I would raise regarding this chapter is Urick’s suggestion that Gandalf is named Stormcrow in Rohan due to his being “so uncharismatic” (56). This seems to miss the mark, given that Wormtongue gives the nickname due to Gandalf arriving in Rohan on the eve of war with ill news. Indeed, Wormtongue goes further by relating the name to “pickers of bones, meddlers in other men’s sorrows, carrion-fowl that grow fat on war” (*The Lord of the Rings* III.6.513). This suggests Gandalf is viewed as self-serving and interfering, rather than simply uncharismatic.

The discussion of communication through actions touches briefly on Saruman before shifting focus to the hobbits, especially Sam. The consideration of the role of song which follows this lacks depth, diminishing its impact as songs are reduced to a very brief comment on cultural artifacts. The songs become merely “reflective of a culture” (64) for Urick, which I cannot help but feel is reductive, especially when the importance and value of Tolkien’s songs has been addressed by works such as *Poetry and Song in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Anna Milon.

This is followed by a consideration of “Representation in Middle-earth” (chapter 7), which chimes with common complaints regarding Tolkien’s lack of diversity. Urick addresses this by suggesting leaders and organizations can “learn even from Tolkien’s deficiencies” (71), extolling the importance of having a range of identities within teams and organizations. To support this

assertion, the chapter ranges through themes of identity, resolving conflicts related to identity and gender and leadership.

Moving onto chapter 8, Urick considers mentorship and knowledge, the importance of the transfer of knowledge, and mutual learning. Addressing a range of mentoring relationships, Urick primarily focuses on positive examples while acknowledging the existence of damaging and negative mentorships, such as Saruman and Wormtongue. The importance of knowledge transfer is a theme throughout this chapter and the example of Gandalf is particularly useful—his role as a mentor to Bilbo, Frodo, and Aragorn (to name only a few) is thoroughly and productively explored. The importance of knowing when to step back as a mentor (again exemplified by Gandalf) and developing the ability to reasonably question a mentor are both interesting discussions which clearly relate to Urick’s purpose for this book.

Chapter 9, “Conducting meetings,” does what it says on the tin by considering two prominent examples of meeting. After briefly reviewing the purpose of meetings, Urick considers both the unexpected party at the beginning of *The Hobbit* and the Council of Elrond in *The Lord of the Rings*. Using these examples, Urick selects key attributes which contribute to the success of these meeting which include: food; communication of purpose; assigning roles; the clean-up or aftermath; a strong host; facilitating knowledge sharing; and brainstorming. This chapter provides a primarily “practical discussion of things that leaders need to think about as they plan and facilitate meetings” (91).

One of the most problematic chapters, chapter 10, centers around “Care for Resources.” The first part of this chapter explores examples of environmentalism in Tolkien, discussing the hobbits stewardship of the Shire and the Ents; these sections are largely descriptive. The ensuing discussion of waste feels very dissociated from Tolkien’s work, which even Urick seems to acknowledge in the statement “By clearly presenting Saruman as a villain and having him commit so many acts of waste, it is *probably* safe to *assume* that Tolkien himself was very anti-waste” (98), emphasis mine. It feels very like the author wanted to talk about waste in a business and leadership context and tried to shoehorn Middle-earth into this, a square peg in a round hole. Issues with this chapter persist in evaluating environmentalism and Tolkien’s faith—this discussion seems to want to engage with themes of stewardship while ignoring Denethor (who seems an obvious figure to approach in this context) and relying on the *Laudato Si*, a Catholic text produced in 2015 by Pope Francis. I am not convinced this adds anything to Tolkien scholarship, or discussions of leadership, and suggest this is the most obviously weak chapter in the entire book.

In a somewhat disjointed movement, “Celebrations” follows this in chapter 11. Central concerns of this chapter include the importance of leaders

celebrating success, music and entertainment and getting back to work after celebrations. Urick gestures towards the framing of *The Lord of the Rings* though two celebratory events as significant modelling for recognizing accomplishments and milestones, highlighting the importance of valuing individuals and team efforts. Music and song are again discussed quite superficially, and the chapter concludes with challenge of getting teams back to work after celebrations.

The final chapter, “Applying Leadership in Middle-earth to Our Own Contexts,” acts as a summary of each chapter’s central arguments. The core message of each chapter is distilled into a bullet point list, building the picture of factors contributing to a good leader. This encapsulates the selling points of this book—its accessibility. Urick’s intention to explore leadership through popular culture is well served with his discussion of Tolkien, but will likely disappoint Tolkien scholars with its lack of attention to detail and reliance on film adaptations of the original works.

—Alana White

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