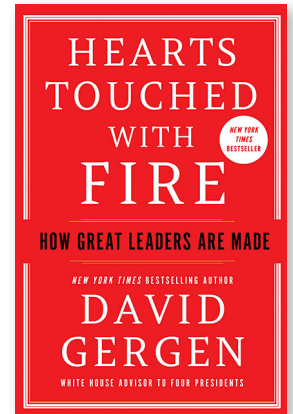


# Hearts Touched with Fire

How Great Leaders are Made

by **David Gergen**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

David Gergen was immensely grateful for the opportunity to have worked for four presidents in the White House but he had grown disillusioned with the direction in which our politics was headed and wanted to pass on to the next generations the key leadership lessons he had stockpiled from half a century in the public arena. This dream has taken on great urgency.

Who could have imagined that our democracy might be on the brink of collapse? Who could have imagined that serious observers would be debating whether we are heading toward a civil war? But here we are. It's time to face a stark reality: much of our future now rests upon an infusion of fresh blood into our civic life. We need new, talented leaders who are looking for paths forward, not obsessing over past differences, who put country before party, unity before division. In *Hearts Touched with Fire: How Great Leaders are Made*, through stories and reflections from his half century in the public arena, David Gergen shares what he has learned about the development of young, passionate leaders and why he is encouraged.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to become the author of your own life
- The four keys to resilience as a leader
- How to manage up, down, and sideways.
- The seven deadly sins of leadership

### Part One: Your Inner Journey

#### Hearts Touched with Fire

Oliver Wendall Holmes, Jr. dropped out of Harvard to serve his country in the Civil War. He suffered grievous wounds that shaped and strengthened his public leadership. He rose to become one of the nation's most influential and eloquent jurists, named to the Supreme Court by Teddy Roosevelt and serving until FDR reached the White House. In a speech on Memorial Day in 1884, describing how military life had inspired his generation, he said, "*In our youth, our hearts were touched with fire.*"

What a glorious way to capture what so many young men and women have experienced in one era after another in committing themselves to civic life, seeking to create a fairer, more just, and more peaceful world. Life will hold perils, but in devoting yourself to the service of others, you find a satisfaction that transcends your troubles. As many have discovered, service and leadership are inextricably bound together. Indeed, leadership at its best is service to others.

Experts disagree whether the qualities and talents of effective leaders are in their DNA. You may have been born with some natural advantages, but if you want to excel as a leader, you have to work steadily over a long period of time. Frequently, personal development depends heavily upon your own patience and persistence.

It is only through first mastering your own intentions, coming to understand your values, and then leading increasingly large groups of followers that one can truly become an effective leader. The journey is not straightforward and is sure to be full of failures large and small, but leading can prove to be one of life's most meaningful endeavors.

#### Becoming the Author of Your Own Life

Leadership starts from within. It's important to learn how the world works, but it is even more important to learn how you work. As the preacher Peter Gomes used to say, you must learn to lead yourself before you can serve others. In short, you must wrestle early on with your own self-awareness and your own self-mastery. Each of us must discover for ourselves who we are, what we believe in, and what dreams we have for the future.

In our own time, we continue to ask ourselves about our purpose. Hundreds if not thousands of essays about leadership have agreed that a clear understanding of yourself is the foundation upon which to build an integrated life. But

those essays are all over the lot about how to get there.

The people who have achieved the greatest understanding of their inner selves have been "reflective practitioners"—those who have welcomed a wide array of experiences, have read history and biographies with care, and have had a series of conversations with their inner selves, exploring ways to build that foundation.

One of the best essays on leadership was published in 1999 by Peter F. Drucker, the foremost management guru of the twentieth century. In "Managing Oneself" Drucker wrote that to become self-aware, a person should ask herself or himself a set of basic questions to discover their strengths and weaknesses.

Obviously, people are better at working from strength. The trouble, Drucker argues, is that most people think they know what they excel at but are usually wrong. Candid feedback thus becomes essential. Finding the right formula to achieve self-knowledge is a fluid undertaking. Whatever test you use, Drucker argues, you should learn several basic things about yourself:

- How do you learn? Are you a reader or a listener?
- Where do you lie on the introvert/extrovert scale?
- How do you respond to stress?
- Are you a good number one but a better number two? Some people are terrific subordinates or CEOs but terrible at the top—and vice versa.

Self-awareness is a foundation of your journey, but for a potential leader, the secret to long-term success is to build upon your self-understanding in order to achieve self-mastery. Too many lack self-confidence or find the obstacles too big. They give up their quest too soon and ultimately fall short. But history shows many, many examples of others who persevered against all odds—and became authors of their own lives.

#### Surviving the "Flaming Crucible"

"Crucibles" mold a public leader. For a long while, leadership scholars saw crucibles as a form of adversity and focused on ways that leaders cope with setbacks. More recently, crucibles have gained a spotlight of their own as biographers and others have come to see how much leaders transform themselves during key moments in their lives. There is no better example than FDR and his battle living and leading with polio.

... the skills required to conquer adversity and emerge stronger and more committed than ever are the same ones that make for extraordinary leaders.

As Doris Kerns Goodwin, the wonderful historian, wrote in her book *Leadership in Turbulent Times*, “Franklin Roosevelt’s ordeal provides the most clear-cut paradigm of how a devastating crucible experience can, against all expectation and logic, lead to significant growth, intensified ambition, and enlarged gifts for leadership.”

One danger of leadership studies and books is that most people will not become the president or prime minister of their country, much less FDR. So it’s tempting to shrug at the example. But crucibles are more universal than something we include in stories of a great president to humanize him or explain his rise. Crucibles, as one scholar put it, “may be found woven into the fabric of daily life.”

A wife is unable to say goodbye to a husband as he dies from COVID-19; a father watches helplessly as his tiny daughter drowns; a Black mother is devastated when her twenty-five-year-old son is shot dead jogging through a white neighborhood by white men who say they mistook him for a burglar. The human experience is such that each one of us will likely encounter acute suffering at one point or another. These events can allow us to reshape our visions of ourselves and the world around us.

Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas popularized the importance of crucibles in the literature of leadership. They wrote, “One of the most reliable indicators and predictors of true leadership is an individual’s ability to find meaning in negative events and to learn from even the most trying circumstances. Put another way, the skills required to conquer adversity and emerge stronger and more committed than ever are the same ones that make for extraordinary leaders.

### The Keys to Resilience

Beyond the obvious foundational qualities of all leaders—character, integrity, courage—there are four other key qualities that characterize men and women who have responded to crucibles with resilience:

1. A Sunny Temperament: having a positive, optimistic outlook
2. Adaptability: a willingness to change course without

hesitation or fear

3. Hardiness: an unflappable commitment to the cause
4. Stoicism: emphasizes liberty, independence, self-command, stern self-mastery, putting aside of passions, restraints, and a resolute devotion to honor.

A sunny temperament, adaptability, hardiness, stoicism—these four qualities remain the hallmarks of those who successfully respond and ultimately conquer their crucibles with an inner resilience.

There is no guarantee, of course, that if you have all four qualities, you will emerge as a promising, resilient leader; but if you lack them, there is a good chance you will wind up a loser.

### Turning Adversity into Purpose

Tough times call forth strength and bravery from an alert citizenry. Time and again, public leaders knocked down repeatedly have rebounded and actually grown stronger.

In many instances, those who were struck have also acquired a new moral purpose in their lives. Leaders are pitched into a crucible—suffering, floundering, sinking—before resilience sets in and then, thankfully, one finds a purpose and a path toward generosity and wisdom.

Leaders rise to the challenge, bouncing back through a determined resilience. And even more impressively, each has reexamined life’s possibilities and embraced a new destination. They grow in inner strength, dedicating their lives to a higher moral purpose. They give proof that William Faulkner was right when he said that “man will not merely endure: he will prevail.”

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## Part Two: Your Outer Journey

### Learning to Lead Up

In our twenties and thirties, when most of us start our outer journeys, we might entertain visions that within a few years we will be running our own organization and telling others

what to do. After all, we think, we have addressed our inner issues, studied hard, and our credentials are in order. Surely, we are the ones our new boss has been waiting for. Wrong! Little do we appreciate when young that the path forward will possibly be a lot longer and more complicated than we think.

Those on promising leadership paths are still learning how to manage—manage not only yourself but your boss, your colleagues, your team, and even your outside collaborators. There is an art to managing up, sideways, and down—especially when done at the same time.

To lead is to effectively organize and interact with those with whom you work, to understand the priorities and goals of your colleagues, and see that those goals are put into action. Every leader knows how to manage, but being a manager in itself does not make for a great leader. In other words, management skills are a foundation upon which leadership is imagined and built.

So, how can you best support your boss, making them as well as your team more successful? What follows is an overview of the best ways to manage up, with most of the takeaways applying to support jobs across the organizational landscape.

### **In the Early Days of a Job, Figure Out Your Boss and Play to Their Strengths**

In managing up, you embark on your outer journey—learning how to help your boss navigate and succeed as a leader of others. What do you see in your bosses? What are their strengths? Their weaknesses? How can you build up one and diminish the other? A good staff brings out the best in others, starting with the boss.

### **Keep One Eye on Today, the Other on Tomorrow**

In addition to getting each day's work done well, a smart staff member also pays serious attention to what's coming down the pike. What is just over the horizon but will be hitting us sooner than we think? How can we get out in front? What should our strategy be? What preparations would help?

### **Speak Conscience to Power**

The traditional rule of thumb, of course, is that a good staff member should speak truth to power. We hear that so often that it almost goes without saying. But the more meaningful occasions have come when followers speak conscience to power. That often takes courage because you are challenging the judgment and even the ethics of your boss. Speak-

ing conscience to power is not only the right thing to do—it can also build your reputation.

### **Argue Your Case, Then Get on Board**

A good organization encourages dissenting voices, but once the boss makes a decision, a staff member salutes and gets to work. If you can't live with the decision, there's the exit door. Even if it doesn't go well, every single staffer must lock ranks and cheer it on. That's the way it's supposed to work.

### **A No-Surprise Rule**

Increasingly, good leaders now push responsibility deeper into the ranks. From cabinet officers to executives in the corner office, top leaders remain responsible for developing strategies, but they empower leaders one or two tiers below to execute.

There's much to be said for that approach. But it comes with one catch: It is essential that leaders up and down the ranks must be transparent and candid with one another. "No surprises!" Otherwise lack of trust will break down and metastasize. It's especially important to know bad news and act on it before it reaches the press.

### **Serve as Good Eyes and Ears—As Well as Chief Diplomat**

One of the hardest challenges for a boss is to have a clear, honest reading of his or her own team members. Someone has to have a finger on the pulse, quietly keeping the boss well informed. No surprises, remember?

Conversely, that same person ought to be the chief diplomat for the boss, reaching out to colleagues beyond the inner circle, keeping them informed about the morale, moods, anger swings, and perspectives of the leader in the front office. Absent a steady flow of information, members of the team may begin to feel distant and distrustful. Rumors can spread and morale can deteriorate.

### **Leading Your Team**

Leadership studies have historically focused on lone, heroic individuals grappling with the forces of darkness. But much has changed over the years. In this new century, rather than battling alone, leaders are often embedded in teams, their success resting heavily upon how well they and all other parties collaborate with each other. "Creative collaboration" has become the new model of well-run organizations.

The most memorable photo of President Obama, for

We want our leaders to be caring and compassionate when they should be but also be tough, deceitful, and cunning when they need to be.

example, is not in the loneliness of the Oval Office but in the Situation of the West Wing, where he and half a dozen members of his national security team are huddled together, electronically engaged with Navy SEALs halfway around the world, ridding the world of Osama bin Laden. Working closely together—a tight, effective team.

Black Lives Matter was created in 2013 by three young Black women. Soon after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin some thirty communities had organized local chapters and formed alliances with other like-minded groups.

But BLM resisted the notion of empowering a single, heroic figure to represent it publicly. It was to be decentralized. Its founders intentionally wanted power to flow from the bottom up instead of top down. The rise of BLM and other bottom-up structures has clearly taught us that in this new century, teams have become as important as individuals in shaping our future.

That doesn't mean we no longer need to develop individual leaders of character and courage. Far from it—we need them more. They remain indispensable in pulling together organizations, determining strategy, and inspiring others. But in today's world, a leader's principal job is also to recruit and empower members of a good team. Going forward together is now the way to get big things done.

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## Part Three: Leadership in Action

### When Journeys Converge

We have explored the inner and outer journeys that develop leadership capacities. Now opens a conversation about the integration of one's inner and outer journeys—and how that integration can lead to the ultimate goal of leaders these days: getting big things done. The inner and outer journeys of a leader can converge and create meaningful change in our national life.

Moving into leadership takes many shapes. Integrating your inner and outer journeys looks different for each leader, but taking the time to combine the two is essential for those

stepping into power. As individuals take the reins, a careful, consistent vision and an understanding of one's circumstances are also necessary precursors to effective leadership. You must become a student of your context before you can become its master.

### How Leaders Lose Their Way

Leadership in the public arena can be one of the noblest and most fulfilling experiences that you can undertake. But it comes with temptations that have time and again been the undoing of men and women who lose their way. Leaders often veer off course, abandoning their True North and often self-destructing.

There exists the “low arts” of leadership, as Hamilton called them, and a paradox of American politics: how we want our leaders to be caring and compassionate when they should be but also be tough, deceitful, and cunning when they need to be. When—if ever—should principled leaders resort to the low arts, and how should they defend themselves from others seeking to drag them down?

### The Seven Deadly Sins of Leadership

Over time, Catholics have identified seven of the deadliest sins and have drawn upon them to instruct their flock in virtuous living: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

As Catholics have learned, the best way to counter these sins is not to hate sin but to love virtue more. Embracing the virtues diminishes the possibility of personal derailment. In that spirit arises the Seven Deadly Sins of Leadership and an offsetting virtue for each.

- 1. Hubris vs. Humility:** In leadership, the number one danger is that success will go to your head—that you will begin to think that your very success means that you are different, that you are above mere mortals, and that, in fact, the rules don't apply to you. Ambition leads to self-confidence, which leads to arrogance, which leads to self-destruction. There is but one clear answer to hubris: **HUMILITY!**

- 2. Narcissism vs. Empathy:** Closely related to hubris is an excessive love of self that we see in narcissists. Some can succeed despite themselves, especially if they can make up for it with empathy and a common understanding. As a leader, you must keep your ego under control and remember, it is not about you.
- 3. Greed vs. Modesty:** Among leaders who grew up with modest means and then rose to power, there is a natural tendency to want a more secure financial base. Many become greedy, but many others are driven by their hardscrabble lives to make the world a more supportive place.
- 4. Obstinance vs. Resolution:** We praise leaders who are strong and decisive. Yet we have also learned that if a leader carries a strength too far, it can turn into a weakness. Certainly we have learned that resolution—carried on too long in the face of growing arguments to the contrary—can turn into obstinance and become the undoing of leaders.
- 5. Imprudences vs. Wise Judgment:** Our culture celebrates leaders who are bold, decisive, and willing to take risks. But there is a fine line between smart versus rash, prudent versus reckless. Good judgment is indispensable to good leadership. And that judgment must be found through a blend of experience, mistakes, study, and reflection. You aren't born with it. Like so much else in life, you must earn it.
- 6. Basic Dishonesty vs. Straight Shooting:** Honesty and transparency are some of your best tools in building trust and a connection with the public. There are times when a leader must lie for the sake of national security. But when lies become chronic, nothing that a leader says can be accepted at face value.
- 7. Distrust vs. Openness:** Trust must run in both directions in a democracy: Followers must trust their leaders to tell them hard truths, while, similarly, leaders must trust followers will believe in them. Today, public trust in our national leaders has plunged to dangerous levels.

### Leading Through a Crisis

Leaders must frequently struggle with crises in their individual lives—crucibles as we called them. Crises have come and gone over time, but we have now entered an age when they are striking the world with a force, frequency, and intensity most of us have never experienced before. And if

the past is prologue, even nastier crises lay ahead. There are personal qualities that seem most essential for leaders coping with crises today.

There are qualities leaders should have regardless of circumstance or sector: character, courage, integrity, moral purpose, vision, adaptability, grit, and persuasion foremost among them. Those same qualities remain essential in times of crisis. There are four other qualities essential for effective leadership in a crisis:

- 1. “A Great Carelessness of Self”:** Among the leaders we most admire, we so often find this sentiment today. They put the lives of others first, showing great carelessness of self.
- 2. Prudent Judgment:** A prudent leader must be informed by experience and have a curiosity about the world, a grasp of relevant data and information, a sense of responsibility for their team, and the patience and perseverance to see it through hard times.
- 3. Fingerspitzengefühl:** This is a German word that means “fingertips feel”—an elusive concept describing how a person might have an instinctive feeling or intuitive flair. Those who possess it often have a feel for how events are likely to unfold and can prepare themselves early.
- 4. Coolness under Fire:** It is critically important for leaders to remain cool in a crisis.

We judge leaders by their legacies. The America that the World War II generation created was united and well led, proving that when inspired, we are a can-do people. Those lessons from another generation are of growing significance today.

Once again, we are facing an existential threat to the republic. Once again, we hear a clarion call for unity and action. Once again, we face the questions: Will our citizenry answer the call? Can the next greatest generation rise up to lead us to brighter days ahead?

The nation needs you; indeed, the world needs you. We must have new, forceful leaders who have found their True North and can navigate past the crises that are coming their way. We need passionate idealists who will stand up to those blocking our way toward a more giving and just society. We need men and women of character and honor.

We need you to step into the arena, your hearts touched with fire.



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