

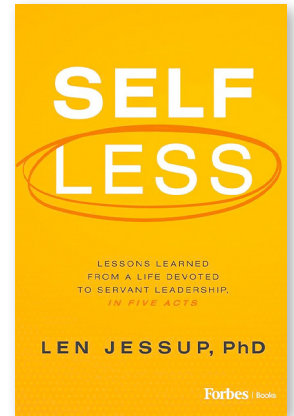


Executive Book Summaries[®]

Self Less

Lessons Learned from a Life Devoted to Servant Leadership, in Five Acts

by **Len Jessup**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Leadership that drives real positive change doesn't manifest via a top-down authoritarian system. Instead, it demands focusing on serving people.

The book *Self Less: Lessons Learned from a Life Devoted to Servant Leadership, in Five Acts* uncovers the value of lifelong learning, relationship building, staying true to one's purpose, and maintaining resilience in a leadership position. The pages within emphasize on building a selfless mindset to maximize positive impact on people through leadership, innovation, teamwork, and community partnerships.

Author Len Jessup chronicles his journey – from childhood moments to university experiences – that shaped him to become a selfless leader committed to organizational transformation. His insightful and memorable life lessons inspire us to tap into the power of humility and service to drive real organizational change.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Learn how “Self Less” leadership prioritizes others’ needs and teamwork.
- Become a selfless leader devoted to organizational transformation.
- Prioritize service and humility in your leadership endeavors.
- Drive meaningful change through innovation and community partnerships.

Introduction

This book is about selfless leadership as a way to lead others in transformational organizational change. Yes, this sounds counterintuitive. After all, aren't great leaders supposed to take charge and tell people what to do? While I know it's natural to think this way, just the opposite is true. Selfless leading helped me and others to do some amazing things together. It was and is for me a powerful way to lead others in some amazing, transformational organizational changes.

So that's the central plot here: selfless leadership as a powerful tool for leading others through transformational organizational changes. To delve into this idea, I will share a series of personal examples to illustrate my points. From there, I'll use that foundation to describe how those moments shaped my approach to leadership. And then I'll drive home these points by sharing stories about how teams I've led accomplished some wonderful objectives.

Act 1: Origins

Confidence Shaken to the Core

When I entered college, there was so much I didn't understand. But I had a voracious appetite to learn. I recall the time I wrote an extensive paper for my art history class. I submitted my paper, and a few days later, the professor accused me of cheating and said my work was too good to be true. But I gathered myself and swore to my profession that I had written the paper. After countless questions, the professor was finally certain that it was indeed my work and said that it was very well-written. I felt so relaxed and left his office feeling affirmed: Perhaps I could succeed at college, and perhaps I deserved to be there!

Don't Let 'Em Bring You Down

After finishing two years of college, I followed my friends down to Chico State. Another one of my professors at this college didn't believe that I had written one of my papers. This time though I was ready. I was able to quickly dispel their skepticism about the authenticity of the paper, without being shocked or even surprised. There have been so many people who doubted me along the way: teachers, professors, coaches, colleagues, and even my own dad. I knew what I was capable of, and that was enough for me.

Don't Let Them Take Away Your Power Over Yourself

After two years at Chico State, I finished my undergradu-

ate degree in fine style. And those same two faculty members who grilled me over my paper became friends and let me know I was among the top students graduating in that major. I was proud I had completed the program and done well. I decided to stay for an MBA, but my parents could do little to help me pay for my education. I worked multiple jobs every summer as well as a part-time job during school each year. Dad had finally taken the attitude that I must be doing something right.

Turning the Corner with My Dad

By the time I finished my MBA, my dad's attitude about me attending school had completely shifted. He finally saw value in what I was doing and was affirming me. Soon afterward I entered my doctoral program at the University of Arizona. When everything was packed in my car and I was ready to leave, Dad walked me out, and in private out on the front porch, looked me in the eyes with a warm smile. Holding me by my arms, he somberly nodded and said, "You're off on a great adventure..."

Off on a Great Adventure

When I arrived at the University of Arizona, I felt very lonely. I had never lived so far from home, I didn't yet know where I would spend the night and felt intimidated by this new, high-powered research university with an even smarter group of people around me. They introduced me to the other doctoral students. Everyone was smart and helpful. Even though I had a serious case of imposter syndrome by that point, I saw that my grades and references from my supportive faculty were exceptionally good. They showed that I had gotten into the doctoral program by the skin of my teeth.

The Life of the Mind

I was growing intellectually and gaining more self-confidence, but I still had lingering self-doubts. The upside was that it caused me to work even harder. My mantra became that if a day goes by where I don't embarrass myself, I'm not trying hard enough. I was surrounded by so many smart, talented people that I figured I was bound to say or do something embarrassing.

But I had to let that go. I knew that for me to continue to grow, I had to continue to learn and get better. Mistakes weren't likely going to be catastrophic. Rather, they were opportunities for learning and growth.

Shaped My Past

I think back on this time in my life often and can see now

A good leader, by definition, can influence the way people think and act.

how these events and people shaped me. Somewhere in early adulthood, this all rang clear for me, and it shaped my life's purpose: "When I get to the end of my path, I want to be able to look back and know at that moment that I did everything I possibly could, to do as much good as I possibly could, to have as much positive impact as I possibly could, for as many people as I possibly could, and that I never shied away from an opportunity to do so."

I would live a purpose-driven life in service to others. I would be a servant leader, and higher education would be my platform and vehicle.

Act 2: Beliefs

Strongly Consider Accepting Even the Little Assignments

I never shied away from an opportunity to help, to speak up, or to lead, whether in informal or formal roles. And as I kept saying yes to these opportunities, the roles and assignments got bigger, and the potential for impact became correspondingly larger. Within a literally short time, I was offered roles that forged my skills and reputation as a leader and change agent. Each of those moves made total sense to me at the moment, and each felt like it was exactly the next thing I was supposed to do to achieve my life purpose.

Take On Big Challenges, but Do So with Eyes Wide Open

A good leader, by definition, can influence the way people think and act. A leader might simply be trying to get people to perform tasks in a certain way, under certain constraints, and within a prescribed time. On the other end of the spectrum, a leader might be tasked with trying to move an entire organization from an undesirable "as is" situation to a "to be" state in the future that is better. In all cases, a leader must get things done with and through other people. So, at its core, leadership is fundamentally about leading change, leading people through change, and motivating people to collectively enact that change.

Leadership Is Organizational Change

Think back again to the basic definition of leadership: to influence the way that people think and act. With that in mind, maybe you find yourself in a position where you need to influence people to do something. You might think you know what it is they need to do and the direction you need them to move, but don't be so certain. You need to figure out what the problem is and confirm it with the people who are involved and impacted. Because I always assume I don't know anything, I always begin by listening, learning, asking a lot of questions, and talking with as many people as I possibly can.

Listen Before You Speak or Make Up Your Mind

Whether you talk with people directly or someone else helps you listen to others, you are going to need to learn from the people impacted by the change about to happen. From all that learning, you will get to the point where you have a good sense of what you think the current state of the organization is, what the real problems are, why they are happening, how they are holding the organization back, what the desired state of the organization is, how that can be enacted, where the opponents and hot spots are, where the change agents are, and so on. You won't have the complete picture, and it will likely morph over time, but through this learning phase, you will have a much better handle on things than when you started.

You've Got to Size It Up Before You Take It On

So, you've listened, you've learned, and you've gained at least an initial basic sense of what needs to happen. Your next step is to ensure that the relevant people involved see clearly and consistently that there is a need for change and what that change needs to be. You and your team, including those key influences, will need to work together to explain, persuade, cajole, negotiate, prove, incentivize, and sometimes plead with others involved. Eventually, you'll get a clearer sense of the opposition and how you need to contend with them as well. These organizational transformations are often grounded in very simple values. And these values exist as basic truths for people in the organization.

Distill the values into core tenets. From there, communicate both the good and the bad and rally people around the productive values while sidelining the negative ones, until enough people are on board to begin moving the organization forward.

In This Case, Values and Organizational Culture Will Eat Strategy for Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner

The most difficult aspect of organizational transformations is convincing people that the vision you are presenting is possible. But when people think something isn't possible, it's hard to move to the next level with them. A limiting belief is a state of mind that you might have, or a belief about yourself or your situation, that restricts you in some way. Changing people's beliefs about what is possible for them, and their organization is perhaps the most difficult component of leadership. To illustrate this point, let me share a personal example.

No Way We Are Going to Get This Done

Jack, one of my amigos from my doctoral program, recruited me to join him at Washington State University (WSU) to help build a grow a nascent information systems program in the business school. Things were going remarkably well until the prior dean left and we found ourselves with interim leadership. So, I threw my hat in the ring for the dean's job. In my first day on the job, I was barraged by my new staff with a host of problems. Several things were broken in terms of the way the business school operated. Many of our alumni and other external stakeholders had disengaged, and our finances were problematic on several dimensions. Worst of all, we were on probation and about to lose our AACSB accreditation.

I had never faced anything quite so difficult before in my professional life. I wondered what I had gotten myself into. But about this time, I received some good advice from some mentors to be forthright with my team about these problems. And so, I did just that. I let everyone within the business school see the full report and all twenty-six key problems. I also let leadership across campus see what we were up against. I basically confided in anyone I felt needed to know or whom I felt could help us be successfully re-accredited.

That turned out to be the right thing to do. Everyone now knew exactly where we stood, and they saw the gravity of the problems we faced. Much to my surprise, nearly all of them leaned in and wanted to help, and together, we dove

into the accreditation report and made recommendations on how we could fix each of the twenty-six problems within the twelve-month deadline.

Transparency, Transparency, Transparency

The good news in being so transparent with everyone about reaccreditation was that we all had the same sense of the problems we faced and the importance of working together to solve them. The bad news with being so transparent was that everyone in the business school was now acutely aware of the gravity of the situation and the difficulty in getting this all done on time.

Fortunately, I was able to persuade the accreditation agency to give us some extra time because I was new and a first-time dean. They graciously agreed to an additional six months, which provided a little more breathing room. Then, we left no stone unturned to convince people that immediate change was possible. The result? We got everything fixed within the eighteen-month time frame. We worked aggressively every day to continuously make the business school better at a time when many undergraduate business programs were stagnant.

It All Begins with the Belief That It is Possible

We humans aren't immune to doubting ourselves from time to time. This is why having a solid belief system in place is vital to stay focused on our goals. To truly build a belief system that it is indeed possible to achieve the goals you've set for yourself and your people, ask yourself: What might your limiting beliefs be about what is possible or not possible? More to the point, what might your limiting beliefs be as a leader? What might be the limiting beliefs among your team members, and how might they be holding the team and your organization back in what you all might accomplish? What can you do to help your team see what is possible? How might these beliefs shape prevailing values, and how might core values be driving or hindering what people believe is possible or desired? When you envision a positive, possible future for you and the others on your team, how does that feel?

The Naysayers Never Go Away; They Just Have Fancier Titles

Another experience I had while in leadership roles at WSU shook my beliefs to the very core. I was talked about as a possible candidate to succeed my boss as president. But a senior, key, external advisory member for the university confirmed that she had spoken against me because she felt I was too nice to be a university president.

Sometimes you must realize that you cannot get everyone's support, so you must either work around them or redirect them for other important tasks.

Despite some naysayers like that along the way, I've been fortunate to be a part of many transformations, and overcoming limiting beliefs was a difficult problem in every case. Her lack of belief in me didn't shake my belief in myself. Further, my values about what I was doing were so strong and deep by that point that I wasn't going to let her limiting beliefs about me deter me from my path.

Act 3: Adversity

Resistance Can Take Many Forms, Some Not Easy to See

There are several types of adversity you're likely to face when transforming an organization.

Many of them are environmental and things outside the organization that are likely beyond your control. Examples might include a pandemic or an economic downturn. But the type of adversity I'm talking about here is the internal kind. It's the kind of adversity primarily stemming from people who are not onboard with your proposed changes. Don't count out or ignore those in opposition. You'll encounter them often, and you'll need to deal with them one way or another.

Sometimes You Need to Ask the Resistors to Step Aside

When we faced resistance against launching an online MBA program, we found a way to essentially get this group of faculty members to politely stay out of the way of those who would pour their hearts into building and delivering a great online MBA. We got to the place we needed to, but not with everyone onboard. Sometimes you must realize that you cannot get everyone's support, so you must either work around them or redirect them for other important tasks.

You'll Need to Develop Patience, Resilience, and Nerves of Steel

When I was facing one of the toughest challenges in my life during my presidency at UNLV, I learned useful lessons in patience and resilience. I was playing the long game and worked hard not to let a few adversaries hold me or the

university back. When I got knocked down by them, I rose up, dusted myself off, and got back in the game to make another play. I also had to be very careful to take care of myself mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually through those trying times.

Act 4: Impact

Lighten Up on Yourself Because You're Not the First

The other component of my purpose statement has to do with impact. In fact, impact is at the core of my purpose statement. I want to have a positive, visible, tangible, felt impact, and not just a little. I want to have done as much of that as I possibly can. The final note about that purpose statement is that I am focused on positively impacting other people. In business, we often talk about having an impact on people, profits, or planets, and the trade-offs for an organization between chasing after one of those versus another.

If You're Not Having a Positive Impact on Others, What's the Point?

In our modern Westernized society, work dominates our limited waking hours. As a leader in an organization, the people under your charge are spending a disproportionately large proportion of their limited waking hours with you working. Keeping this in mind, wouldn't you as the leader want to try as hard as you can to make sure this time is well spent? Wouldn't you want to make sure they are spending that time meaningfully?

Sometimes What Seems to Be the Small Stuff Is Often the Most Important and Difficult

During my time at UNLV, I noticed that the institution offered a generous personnel benefit available to faculty and professional staff that offered nearly free tuition and fees to that person's spouse. But that incredible tuition benefit was not extended to the classified staff. This included groundskeepers as well as people in areas such as maintenance, janitorial, and secretarial – the people who needed that tuition benefit the most for their spouses and depen-

dents. Despite facing a lot of resistance from some people, we managed to bring this policy change, which ended up being truly transformational in people's lives in perpetuity on that campus.

Act 5: Legacy

Raising Money on the Palouse

When I was a junior faculty member, I had several ideas for my program and for my own research, but I quickly figured out that the university couldn't possibly fund them. So, I set to figure out how to secure funding to breathe life into these visions.

Fast forward a few decades, and I have now had the privilege to help raise a lot of money for several projects that drove positive impact. I learned so much about fundraising that I could tell stories over wine for hours on end. I stepped in to lead the overall funding for WSU, that storied university in the beautiful inland Palouse area in the Pacific Northwest. Throughout my fundraising journey, we got to spend time with amazing people and fantastic homes, ranchers, startups, and so on. Even better, we got to visit troubled schools we were helping and spend time in desperate neighborhoods.

You're Never Too Old to Need a Mentor

Throughout this narrative, I've mentioned the many mentors who helped me on my journey. They've played a huge role in my life. Right from the beginning, I always openly, and actively sought out help, and I can think of very few cases where anyone turned me down. Even today, I benefit from the wise council of many university presidents, board members, business leaders, elected officials, and others. And these experiences taught me a valuable life lesson. You're never too old, successful, experienced, or smart to benefit from the mentoring of someone else.

Leadership is Often a Gift and Privilege in Being Allowed to Experience Moments with Others When They Are at Their Best

A very wise fundraising consultant, Bruce, imparted a practical lesson to me that proved useful, especially as I moved into university presidencies. He explained that when I found people who really liked what we had determined were the university's most vital needs and most impactful projects, where in a sense my own values and vision for advancing the university resonated on a deep and consistent

level with the donor's values and vision, that was where the magic would happen. Thanks to his advice, I was able to then participate in some truly transformational gifts that were also incredibly meaningful to the donors.

Beautiful Things Can Happen When Values Align

Over time I learned to shape my fundraising in many healthy and productive ways. It also saved me from having a destructive mindset. For example, I never subscribed to the "own a donor" mentality that is prevalent on a lot of university campuses. We don't own our donors. With the donor-centric approach, we're there for them. Over decades of fundraising in higher education, I've had many funny or awkward moments that stand out. When one donor made one of his first large gifts to the university to help us build a Center for our business students, he initially wanted to name the facility after me. I was flattered, but I explained to him that we needed to name that facility after his family. It was their legacy, not mine.

Sometimes It Is More about Their Legacy and Less About Yours

While at UNLV, I found out that a long-time donor to the university was not in good health and would soon be passing. I quickly grabbed our vice president of development, Scott, and we scheduled a visit for him within a few days. When he arrived with his wife, we talked about programs and students who had flourished as a result. We were also careful to draw out the subsequent role that all of it played in enabling more recent projects like the new stadium in medical school. The donor couldn't communicate too well, but he frequently fought back tears throughout that ride.

There Is Perhaps Nothing Better Than Helping Secure the Legacy of Someone Else

Your legacy lives on in terms of the continued impact your efforts and investments have on successive generations long after you're gone. After I'm gone, I think the highest praise people could give me would be to say I was a nice guy who worked hard. Leadership is perhaps better thought of as trying to reach a state of true enlightenment. It's about the pursuit and not the destination. I don't think of myself as a leader per se. Rather I think of myself as being a student of leadership, always learning and growing.

Leadership Is an Ongoing and Endless Pursuit, Process, and Journey. It Is Not a Definitive Outcome, Destination, or Fixed Trait

Do you ever think about the impact you're having, and whether there might be a continuing impact from your efforts after you're gone? What might your legacy be as a result of your efforts and impact, and how might people perceive it and you long after you're gone? Are you doing all you can to shape that impact and legacy in ways that enable you to continue to do good even when you're not here to do it yourself?

Conclusion

In this book, I tried to focus on the positive, but please understand that this all didn't come without sacrifice, pain, sadness, and regrets. My meta-level lesson from all of this is that I work hard to continue to learn and, in some cases, continue to learn how to learn. I continue to learn and grow in being a better dad, friend, brother, husband, partner, and leader. I'm grateful for the opportunity each day to be enlightened, I suppose you could say that I devoted my life not only to being in service to others but also to learning. Indeed, I can't wait to see what lessons tomorrow brings.



Len Jessup is a two-time university president, two-time business school dean, long-time business school professor, and a startup investor and pioneer. Len is also a visionary leader in higher education, known as a consensus builder with a deep interest in innovation, entrepreneurship, leadership, and organizational change. He is currently president of Claremont Graduate University, a member of the prestigious Claremont College consortium in southern California.

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