

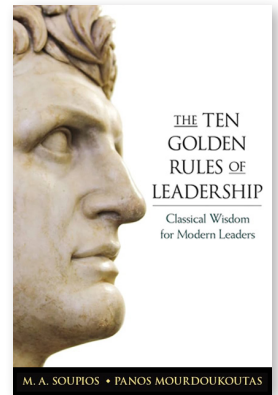


# Executive Book Summaries®

## The Ten Golden Rules of Leadership

Classical Wisdom for Modern Leaders

by **M. A. Soupios and Panos Mourdoukoutas**



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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

*The Ten Golden Rules of Leadership* draws on classical philosophy to argue that effective leadership is not rooted in position, technique, or charisma, but in character, judgment, and disciplined self-knowledge. Authors Michael A. Soupios and Panos Mourdoukoutas contend that leadership begins with understanding one's inner world—strengths, weaknesses, motives, and blind spots—and translating that self-awareness into principled action.

Across ten rules, the book explores how a leader's character shapes workplace culture, the ethical use of power, and the quality of organizational life. Leaders are challenged to cultivate healthy communities, distinguish constructive competition from destructive antagonism, embrace truth and candid criticism, and apply skepticism when evaluating information. Classical figures such as Socrates, Aristotle, Hesiod, Sophocles, and Heraclitus are used not as historical ornament, but as lenses through which modern leadership dilemmas can be better understood.

The central message is consistent throughout: authority without integrity produces compliance, not commitment. Lasting leadership emerges when leaders live by a higher personal code, align ambition with ethics, and transform power into trust. This summary presents leadership as a moral discipline—one that demands courage, restraint, and continuous self-examination.

### IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

- Understand how character shapes authority, power, and workplace culture
- Distinguish ethical leadership from coercion and the misuse of power
- Harness competition and ambition without allowing them to become destructive
- Build trust through integrity, self-knowledge, and principled judgment

### RULE 1

## Know Thyself

Without question, knowledge is an indispensable feature of leadership. Among other things, it is an essential component in addressing the many problems with which leaders are routinely confronted.

There are two types of knowledge: the factual information that can be acquired by formal education and real-world practices and the knowledge of one's own inner world. It is this second category that uniquely establishes the standard of real leadership.

Self-comprehension, therefore, is a fundamental precondition necessary for real leadership. Leaders must understand their inner world—their strengths and weaknesses as well as their bright and dark sides.

Coming to know thyself in a modern sense of the phrase is an immensely difficult task. The modern world offers an endless assortment of trivial endeavors that encourage a superficial, nonanalytical existence. Even for those inclined to seek deeper meaning and understanding, the volume of distraction is such that very few are able to engage in anything approximating a meaningful program of self-interrogation.

There are psychological obstructions we all tend to erect in an attempt to shade our eyes from the glare of troublesome truths. Failure to remove these obstacles renders taking stock of oneself impossible. Those who fail in this regard will never command the intuitions and insights requisite for real leadership. It is essential that the would-be leader commit to an agenda of spirited self-indictment, because the most lethal distortions come not from the lips of our opponents or competitors. They tend to flow, instead, from our own hearts.

Humans are by nature hedonists—pleasure seekers who instinctively desire ease and comfort over challenge and pain. For this reason, the pursuit of truth is rarely comfortable, particularly when it requires understanding who and what we really are. The truth can set us free, but it is not an easy thing to obtain. This category of truth requires struggle, discipline, and courage. Knowing thyself means bringing a fresh transparency to hidden motives and identities. It involves self-revelation whereby one ruthlessly exposes the frauds and deceptions that give comfort.

There is the increasingly important obstacle of mass media imagery. With very few exceptions, we are continually bombarded with portraits of successful types who allegedly merit emulation. These dubious paradigms tend to glamorize lives that are as superficial and inane as they are unreflective.

They promote a disreality that suggests there is no particular urgency in considering the larger questions of life.

Let's be clear about what this implies for leadership. The vast majority of people are unwilling to explore the dark regions of their inner being. In doing so, they create a counterfeit reality for themselves, which can place any organization at great risk.

Knowing oneself means the end of role-playing. It involves casting a harsh and unforgiving light upon a variety of self-exonerating falsehoods. It takes a good deal of nerve to unmask those reassuring lies we so enjoy telling ourselves. But it also takes a good deal of nerve to be a real leader.

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### RULE 2

## Office Shows the Person

Of all the many problems facing today's business world, none is more critical than the quality of the work environment. In the absence of an affable work setting, employee loyalties quickly dissolve. The number one reason for employee exit is a disagreeable workplace. The organization forfeits the time, energy, and resources it invested in recruitment and suffers the effects of having employees who lack meaningful commitment over time.

Negative work settings do not occur spontaneously. This failure can be traced to managerial deficiency and, more often than not, to the abusive misapplication of power. Nothing will more rapidly alienate workers than a manager who delights in resorting to the stick as opposed to the carrot.

As Pittacus observed, "Office shows the person." The assumption of authority brings out the leader's inner world. It reveals whether the leader has undergone a process of honest self-discovery that allows for the productive application of power. Power will invariably reflect what no résumé ever does, namely the psychological and spiritual disposition of the person.

Lord Acton, a 19th century British historian, said, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The misuse of power is a direct result of psychological deficiency. Power becomes a compensatory asset employed as a defense mechanism to offset feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability. The abusive application of power is the only way some leaders can attain a sense of security and confidence. Such situations reduce the work environment to a dysfunctional psychodrama in which morale and productivity are compromised.

The most lethal distortions come not from the lips of our opponents or competitors but from our own hearts.

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Healthy and productive work settings are not the result of spontaneous good fortune. The most important ingredient for success is quality leadership. Failures of leadership will virtually ruin the organization. None is more lethal than arbitrary applications of power. Supervisors who micromanage, second-guess, criticize, and bully are a toxic presence. Their abuses destroy worker motivation, compromise loyalties, and create debilitating resentments.

By contrast, true leaders who have developed a philosophy of life use authority to advance the causes of the organization. Authority, in their hands, becomes an instrument of integrity and conscience.

Effective leaders have no need for or interest in browbeating staff members. They offer object lessons in the fair and enlightened application of authority, leading by dignified example and turning subordinates into believers willing to go the extra mile to advance institutional objectives. True leadership does not come from the crack of a whip. Instead, it reflects a special wisdom that recognizes how often the cooing of a dove proves more profound and productive than the roar of a lion.

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#### RULE 3

### Nurture Community in the Workplace

Well-functioning corporate communities and positive group sentiment are the foundation of the modern workplace. They gather and focus the energies and resources of business organizations in the pursuit of institutional goals. These cooperative units do not arise spontaneously. They tend to be uniquely related to the talents of the leader.

There is no greater evil than discord and faction and no greater good than the bonds of communal sentiment. Only when a social unit enjoys a harmony of value and loyalty will it be able to attain its desired objectives. Therefore, fostering community and shared purpose are virtues leaders must nurture by providing the right support, guidance, and incentives.

Some of the world's most successful companies have attained their status because they enjoy a philosophy of leadership that reflects the virtue of team. They understand both the logic and efficacy of an environment in which the workforce

is skillfully forged into productive units that approach the term “we” as an essential part of the corporate culture.

The two obstacles to creating corporate communities:

- Individualism—placing “I” before “we”
- Lack of willingness to critically self-assess

American culture has an almost romantic fascination with the virtues of the individual. Yet even the most successful individuals depend on a complex system of collective support mechanisms. Ignoring or rejecting these attachments risks cutting oneself off from a critically important shared resource. One of the most essential responsibilities of a genuine leader is to help subordinates recognize that the logic of collective action benefits both the organization and the individual.

A well-ordered group functions as a force multiplier in which the potency of both the unit and the individual enjoy mutual enhancement. The key defining elements include a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to the organization, a spirit of genuine camaraderie among team members, and a consistent willingness to subordinate personal interest in favor of the larger good.

Team composition is critical. Leaders must carefully assess personalities with an eye toward the group dynamic they create, recognizing that chemistry is essential. Facilitation must never be confused with abdication; without continuous guidance, the group can disintegrate into antagonistic camps.

Leaders must keep the group grounded, focused, and on point, adapting a balanced approach—at times laid-back, at times decisive—to avert groupthink. Real leaders resist the temptation to reduce the team to a personal ego platform and, whenever possible, default to “we” as opposed to “I.”

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#### RULE 4

### Do Not Waste Energy on Things You Cannot Change

The word “change” has become a critically important term in today's corporate world for two reasons. First, the spread of globalization with its rapid development of integrated

markets has made change a constant and unavoidable aspect of doing business. Second, the rapid advancement of information technology has produced an environment in which business models are in a continuous state of flux.

If corporations are to survive and prosper in such change-driven environments, “they should strike out on new paths rather than travel the worn paths of accepted success,” to use John D. Rockefeller’s words. Steering clear of old paths and strategies is often difficult. Old habits and institutional inertia are powerful forces that distort the need for change and innovation. They can link the institution to policies and programs with little or no prospect of success while wasting valuable resources.

Conventional wisdom can obscure sound business practices. Subcontracting and outsourcing helped personal computer makers cope with competition brought about by globalization but failed to protect the industry against alternative products such as tablets and smartphones. Similarly, the maxim that concern for core business is the key to competitive advantage can no longer guarantee profitability.

The failure of Eastman Kodak and the gradual decline of Xerox prove that not all strategies work in a rapidly changing business environment. Leaders must assume a posture of flexible response: quick to take advantage of new opportunities and quick to discard practices with little prospect of benefit. Do not waste resources and energies on things you cannot control and things you cannot change.

Aristophanes wrote the comedy *Peace*, which offers a pointed illustration of this principle. One character says, “never will you make the crab to walk straight.” The message is clear: some events and circumstances are unlikely to change, no matter how aggressively we attempt to alter them. This insight underscores the importance of knowing when to suspend efforts to control or transform situations that defy modification.

Leaders tend to be hard-charging types who relish the exhilaration of long odds. They seek opportunities to succeed where others have failed and are prepared to redouble their own efforts and those of their subordinates. There are, however, limits. There will be times when too many variables lie beyond the control of the executive. For instance, they may have control over corporate goals, staffing, corporate partners, and location of units, but not over government policies and competitors.

Genuine leaders understand the consequences of failure and are prepared to acknowledge their role in unfruitful enter-

prises. They are objectively realistic about challenges and accept that on occasion they are incapable of dispensing miracles. After all, it is a fool’s errand to seek to alter the lateral stride of a crab.

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### RULE 5

## Always Embrace the Truth

Anyone who has worked for a large organization has probably noticed a herdlike mentality among subordinates—a tendency to routinely endorse the decisions made at the top, even if those decisions steer the corporate ship in the wrong direction. Dishonest assessments and false praise are potentially toxic features of the corporate environment and must be dealt with in a straightforward manner by a genuine leader.

Apple-polishing is distortive of truth, and truth is the lifeblood of the organization. Effective leaders should always embrace the truth, always encourage candid criticism throughout the organization, be skeptical of flattering appraisals, and never let authority place a wedge between them and the truth.

“There are only two people who will tell you the truth about yourself—an enemy who has lost his temper and a friend who loves you dearly,” said Antisthenes. The evaluative commentaries offered by those around us must be viewed with considerable skepticism. It highlights the remarkable infrequency with which people receive legitimate appraisals about themselves. How a leader responds in these situations will disclose not only that person’s likely success as an administrator but, more fundamentally, the leader’s status as a person.

Wise leaders understand that honest assessment is an essential requirement of effective leadership. It is crucial that opportunity for candid expression be encouraged as widely as possible throughout the organization. The higher up the corporate ladder an executive ascends, the less likely it is that person will receive complete and accurate evaluation. Encouraging such submissiveness jeopardizes the welfare of both the organization and the leader.

How pseudo-leaders seal themselves off from truth:

- They avoid hiring heretics—the opinionated and quarrelsome individuals.
- They have little time for dissenting opinions in corporate meetings.
- They evaluate subordinates according to their affability rather than their performance.

Power will invariably reflect what no résumé ever does, namely the psychological and spiritual disposition of the person.

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Managers must develop the skill and the courage to carefully read the motives of those around them. Learning to stop conning oneself will place the manager in a substantially better position to recognize others' attempts at conning. No leader can hope to do a responsible job in an atmosphere devoid of opportunity for candid expression and forthright analysis.

Real leaders will never be surrounded with a company of honey-tongued parasites, never limit communication to those who passively accept the predigested views of management, and never make the utterance of truth the organization's one unpardonable sin. Truth is an invaluable strategic corporate asset. Don't let it go to waste. Embrace it.

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#### RULE 6

### Let Competition Reveal Talent

Talent is the catchword of modern business, for good reason. It is the ultimate source of competitive advantage, especially in high-technology industries where corporations rely on innovation to differentiate themselves from the competition. Bringing talent out and aligning it with organizational interests requires an environment that allows employees to compete with each other in a constructive rather than a destructive way.

Anyone familiar with the history of ancient Greece knows that conflict was a continuous aspect of their civilization. The Greek term for these rivalrous passions is *agon*, meaning “contest,” and from the earliest beginnings of their history, the Greeks employed competition as a mechanism for identifying an individual's comparative worth and merit. They understood the potent psychological forces involved in opportunities to achieve distinctions of honor and glory. Much of the Greek cultural achievement was directly related to the harnessing of these energies.

Hesiod, the ancient Greek poet best known for *Works and Days*, describes two forms of *Eris* (strife) that animate the human spirit. One takes the form of *antagonism*—a malignant, destructive strife that produces the evils associated with war and releases the selfishness of the individual. Yet he also acknowledges a second, more beneficial form of strife: *competition*, a constructive force rooted in envy and pride that does

not lead to the brutalities of the battlefield. Instead, this form of contention proves productive in economic terms, releasing the ingenuity and creativity of the individual.

Hesiod explains how this constructive strife motivates the shiftless man to work, how neighbor vies with neighbor in the pursuit of wealth, and how members of every vocation are driven to compete within their fields. The net effect of this competitive spirit is the production of more and better “fruit,” which is why he concludes that “this strife is wholesome for men.” Long before modern economists, he grasped the critical connection between human ego and economic productivity—a logic that continues to underpin the system we call capitalism.

For leaders, this distinction is essential. Competition is not inherently destructive, but it must be nurtured, harnessed, and directed to prevent it from devolving into antagonism. Human ambition, when properly managed, can play a critical role in fulfilling organizational objectives. Motivation of this sort, what might be called “impulsions from within,” is rare in large, complex institutions, yet it must remain a pivotal concern of effective leaders. Designing environments that cultivate such motivation through well-structured competition requires leaders to be keen assessors of human personality and disciplined stewards of competitive energy.

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#### RULE 7

### Live Life by a Higher Code

Of all challenges business leaders face as organizations grow, one stands out: aligning subordinates' behaviors, goals, interests, and attitudes with the larger organization. Without alignment, leaders have authority but not the power to lead. Subordinates may comply publicly but violate decisions privately, reducing the likelihood of achieving institutional objectives.

Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that scores of academic papers have been published proposing all sorts of solutions to the problem, from bureaucratic restructuring to sanctions and rewards to cultural controls. But none of these measures can yield the desired results unless leaders earn the trust of their subordinates. The trouble is that trust

doesn't happen by accident, nor can it be manufactured by an army of consultants. Trust must be nurtured over time, and it comes only to those who have dedicated themselves to a higher life code. This is the means by which subordinates become committed followers.

In the history of Western thought, few voices can match the authoritative tones of Aristotle. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, a foundational work on moral philosophy and human flourishing, Aristotle presents a detailed account of the qualities necessary for a good life. In Book 4 of that work, he offers a famous portrait of the “magnanimous” or “great-souled” person. While much of this description reflects distinctions between ancient and modern worldviews, certain traits of the great-souled individual remain remarkably relevant for leadership.

The great-souled individual possesses a strong sense of self-worth—not narcissism—because he or she lives by a higher and more rigorous life code. Personal honor, not ego, is the ultimate priority. Such individuals are morally attuned and largely indifferent to money, power, and title except as secondary outcomes of principled living. They resist petty vanities, never flaunt superiority to demean others, value honesty over opinion, speak directly without guile, refuse to hold grudges, assist without seeking aid, and remain calm in crisis situations.

Every large organization has both a formal and informal identity. Staff may comply with policy in form while violating its spirit in practice, which is why effective leadership must command both. Authority confers formal prerogatives, but power lies in influencing beliefs and conduct even without formal title. A great-souled leader, combining character with both formal authority and informal respect, ensures the highest probability of institutional success.

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### RULE 8

## Always Evaluate Information with a Critical Eye

When assessing information, no organization can afford to be complacent. Knowledge and information are in constant change. What was conventional wisdom yesterday may no longer be valid today. Leaders must consider the circumstances that shaped the information, even the means by which it is conveyed must be critically examined. They should never assume information is unsoiled by hidden agendas, must suspend judgment until data is critically evaluated, and resist the temptation to rush to judgment.

Anyone familiar with ancient Greek philosophy understands that open-ended inquiry was its unique hallmark and that it was specifically this willingness to pursue truth in a fresh and unrestricted manner that distinguished the Greeks from the rest of antiquity. Whereas other ancient peoples were burdened by received opinion, the Greeks insisted, as Socrates said, that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

Socrates repeatedly warned against the conceits of wisdom, a position that explains his famous response to the Oracle of Delphi, a sacred religious authority in ancient Greece believed to speak for the god Apollo, when it identified him as the wisest of the Greeks: “All that I know is that I know nothing.” In other words, Socrates was considered wise precisely because he refused to be inflated by the pretense of knowledge.

Ancient Greek Skeptics, a philosophical movement that challenged baseless intellectual conviction, advanced a critical mental attitude they believed should become a standard feature of every thinking person's cognitive arsenal. The essence of this mindset is reflected in the term *epoche*, which refers to a bracketing or “suspension of judgment.” Skeptics highlighted the need to control a reflexive tendency to jump to conclusions and to assign truth status to ideas, theories, and explanations that fail to merit such attribution.

By adopting skepticism's idea of *epoche*, contemporary leaders enhance administrative effectiveness. This practice of bracketing information slows premature judgment, allowing leaders to certify the credibility and usefulness of information prior to its inclusion in decision-making. Many important choices are too often based on improperly examined premises—assumptions shaped more by conceptual inertia than on meticulous assessment.

Dogmatic thinking is not unique to philosophers; large organizations are equally prone to advancing propositions devoid of factual foundation or adequate evidence. Leaders who recognize this risk apply *epoche* deliberately, proceeding with caution when certifying the credibility of data that will guide critical decisions.

An important part of skepticism involves disabusing ourselves of the myth of pristine information. Both context and medium often contain obscure meanings and hidden intentions. Even hard evidence such as statistical data needs careful scrutiny. Leaders must inspect the source of information, methods of compilation, degree of filtering, track record of suppliers, and possibility of hidden agendas. Strictly speaking, no leader can afford to be complacent when assessing information necessary to operate effectively.

Trust must be nurtured over time, and it comes only to those who have dedicated themselves to a higher life code. ”

#### RULE 9

### Never Underestimate the Power of Personal Integrity

Professional success is the goal of every leader. That goal, however, can be pursued in two ways: the easy way and the hard way.

The easy way involves a denial of principle and integrity. This approach may yield some rapid, short-term gains, but in the end, it typically results in harm to both the organization and the leader. No corporation can benefit when blind ambition and intoxicating greed become the coin of the realm. In contrast, the more difficult path represented by ethical conduct will produce superior results for the company and the executive alike.

Sophocles wrote the play *Philoctetes*—a work we believe should be read and carefully considered by every executive. The two central characters are Neoptolemus and Odysseus.

Neoptolemus is a young man of undefiled principle for whom honor and integrity are the primary concerns of life. Odysseus is a man of mischief and deceit intent upon compromising the youthful integrity of Neoptolemus. Throughout the play, Odysseus advances a dishonorable agenda—the belief that the ends justify the means. Neoptolemus ultimately rejects this view, declaring, “I would prefer even to fail with honor than win by cheating.”

Hard-core cynics believe the principled path leads to defeat and failure and that success must be grasped by whatever means necessary. Any executive who allows moral considerations to cloud thinking empowers the competition with potentially devastating advantages. Dishonesty, duplicity, and deceit are never justifiable activities for a real leader. Managers who rationalize conduct, manufacture fictional rationales, and allow moral considerations to be fluid will inevitably come to grief in every facet of life, including their careers.

The contrast between these two paths can be illustrated by considering two executives with markedly different career trajectories. Executive A did not simply climb the corporate ladder but hacked a way to the top through ruthless ambition, guided by the belief that principle is for losers and that

success depends on how low one is willing to sink. Over time, despite evident ability, this mindset produced a notorious reputation. Subordinates first, and eventually senior leaders, came to view Executive A as untrustworthy—a toxic asset whose questionable conduct threatened morale, collaboration, and even legal exposure, rendering the individual a corporate pariah.

Executive B, by contrast, operates from a deeply held moral conviction consistently evidenced in professional conduct. Known throughout the organization for integrity, transparency, and candor, this executive has accumulated a substantial fund of trust and goodwill. Superiors and subordinates alike are eager to collaborate, confident that Executive B’s word serves as an ironclad guarantee.

The comparison makes abundantly clear that while ruthless ambition may yield short-term advancement, ethical leadership sustains credibility, strengthens institutional loyalty, and supports long-term success for both the leader and the organization.

Honesty, truthfulness, and integrity are invaluable aspects of human credibility. Minus such credibility, no manager can ever hope to attain the status of a real leader. Following the path of Neoptolemus, rather than Odysseus, ensures honor and long-term success.

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#### RULE 10

### Character Is Destiny

Character is the essence of the philosophy of leadership. The set of values leaders espouse, the priorities they embrace, and the life code they live by shape the future of the organizations they lead. As Heraclitus famously observed, “Character is destiny.” True leadership begins within, not without.

Heraclitus is best known for the doctrine of the unity of opposites, which holds that the apparent turmoil and chaos of the world are largely the product of human misunderstanding. Rather than denying change, he argued that reality is highly dynamic, yet governed by an underlying order. What appears disjointed or chaotic is, in fact, part of a well-calibrated harmony in which change in one area is matched by corresponding adjustments elsewhere.

According to him, this hidden order binds existence into a coherent whole, and it is humanity's persistent failure to perceive it that led him to criticize those who considered themselves wise. Disorder, in other words, is often not a feature of reality itself but a symptom of flawed perception.

Who a person is—the values one espouses, the priorities one embraces, the life code by which one lives—inevitably plays a significant role in determining the quality and substance of life. Character tends to be the prime determinant influencing virtually every facet of human experience, from personal relationships to professional lives. Those of good character acknowledge and respect the rights of others, have the courage to accept responsibility for their own shortcomings, and operate in loyalty to a personal code of conduct. This wisdom, stemming from deep self-understanding, helps shape the destiny of real leaders.

The utility of this insight will not be lost on real leaders. Such men and women understand that their substance (character) as people will directly influence their fate as managers. A well-formed character is the priceless reward paid to those who have done the hard work of coming to know themselves.

### Epilogue

There is no royal road to leadership. On the contrary, achieving the rank of genuine leader is a daunting task that most will find prohibitively challenging. Among other things, it involves an intimidating process of self-assessment in which light is cast upon those hidden truths we all tend to zealously conceal. It also requires a kind of moral stamina whereby ethically informed standards become regulative features of a person's life. In sum, leadership requires a special form of courage: the courage to know thyself and the courage to fashion a code of conduct governed by principled conviction.



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