

Leadership That Settled the Frontier

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Abstract

This idea brief explores the leadership lessons displayed by the characters of Louis L'Amour's western novels. Western fiction can be a powerful tool to engage students and demonstrate many leadership theories and models. This brief examines how L'Amour's characters can be used to illustrate Kouzes and Posner's Five Practices of Exemplary Leaders. The author will demonstrate how western literature, specifically L'Amour's novels, can be a tool to help students see leadership in a new light.

Background

The use of popular media as a leadership education and development tool is well-documented (Abbott, 2010; Bogarosh & Andenoro, 2009; Graham, Ackermann, & Maxwell, 2004; Hall, 2010; Loughman & Finley, 2010). Leadership instructors often use movies and television shows, as well as music to demonstrate leadership concepts. Loughman and Finley (2010) even suggest that literature such as *Beowulf* can yield valuable leadership lessons.

Bennis and O'Toole (2005) argued that business schools have lost their way. Bennis and O'Toole foster the idea that students can learn a great deal about leadership through literary fiction. Some business schools have successfully adopted this concept. In his management text, Badaracco (2006) addresses complex issues that leaders face, such as the soundness of their vision, their readiness to take on responsibility, the depth of their compassion, and their ability to manage success, all through the analysis of characters from popular literature. Can the characters in works of fiction also serve as role models for budding leaders?

Author Louis L'Amour published more than 125 works of western fiction. His most notable books follow one family, the Sacketts, as they emigrate from Europe to settle the American continent. His tales follow the Sacketts and their extended family as each generation moves further and further west. His characters possessed those traits necessary to settle the American frontier. They were the leaders of their era. In addition, L'Amour's books have characters that are relatable to students. Through his novels, students can observe the values, practices, and behaviors of successful leaders.

Theoretical Framework

Kouzes and Posner (2008) outline a framework of five practices for exemplary leadership. These five practices are common across all successful leadership experiences. When accomplishing great things in organizations, Kouzes and Posner state that successful leaders practice modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart.

Kouzes and Posner (2008) note that it is the leader's behavior that wins them the respect of their followers. Leaders must possess a clear set of values and model those values to their followers. Kouzes and Posner call this action *modeling the way*. In this case, the leader must model his/her values consistently through their actions.

Kouzes and Posner (2008) also describe successful leaders as those who *inspire a shared vision*. It is critical that leaders demonstrate to others how to envision their own success and create an image of what that future would look like.

“The work of leaders is change” (Kouzes & Posner, 2008, p. 15). *Challenging the process* involves examining the *status quo* and being open to new ideas.

Effective leaders also develop new leaders and effective followers. Creating team members who are confident and competent leads organizational success. Kouzes and Posner (2008) call this *enabling others to act*.

Followers and leaders alike grow weary in the process of building great organizations and making a difference in their communities. They need encouragement and motivation to continue moving forward. Effective leaders *encourage the heart* of their followers (Kouzes & Posner, 2008).

Description of the Practice

I first realized the value of L'Amour's western novels as I described an ethics assignment to my students. They were to identify an artifact that is used to teach or reinforce moral behavior (Boyd & Williams, 2012). Examples of ethical artifacts include children's books, family stories, sports, fables, or even fortune cookies. Having read more than 125 of L'Amour's novels, most of them multiple times, it dawned on me that many of my leadership behaviors and beliefs could be traced back to the characters of his novels. Repetitive reading of his novels had ingrained in me the attitude that hard work leads to success, to treat everyone with respect, a sense of duty to my community, the importance of family, and standing for your values. L'Amour's novels were the artifact that reinforced the values taught to me by my family and community.

L'Amour's characters were leaders of their communities. Those communities ranged from the cow camps and ranches for which they worked to the towns in which they settled. Their vision was to build communities where their families were safe and had the

potential to build a future. In addition to Kouzes and Posner's (2008) five practices of exemplary leadership, L'Amour's characters exhibit many additional values and traits of effective leaders. They have a clear vision for their communities, are authentic, and act in a transformational way towards their followers. Described below are Kouzes and Posner's five exemplary practices and one or more of L'Amour's characters that serve as examples.

Modeling the Way

L'Amour's characters modeled the way for others in the way they sought to better themselves and their community, as well as how they treated others. Many of L'Amour's characters had no formal education, yet all hungered for education. Most of his characters were self-educated, reading whatever they could find. Common reading in the west included the *Bible*, *Blackstone's Commentaries on Law*, and classics such as *Shakespeare* (L'Amour, 1961). Since books were rare (and heavy to transport), those that could be read over and over were preferred. Tennyson, *Ivanhoe*, and *Robinson Crusoe* were staples (L'Amour, 1982). Orrin and Tyrel Sackett were two such characters. In their late teens, they had no formal education and both were completely illiterate. In *The Daybreakers*, Orrin exclaims to his brother, "We got to learn something Tye, we're both ignorant and it ain't a way to be" (L'Amour, 1960, p. 35). They both recognized the value of education if they were to be successful in life.

L'Amour's characters embraced other cultures. His characters hunted with and lived among the Cherokee and other tribes, borrowing from their culture and learning the skills needed to survive the harsh conditions of the frontier. His characters consistently judged others based on their character, not the color of their skin or country of origin. This is a consistent trait of his characters throughout his novels.

In *Over on the Dry Side*, young Doby makes a generalization about Indians. Borden Chantry instructs him, "You can't talk about all Indians the same way, boy. Anytime a man comes along and says 'Indians' or 'Mexicans' or 'Englishmen' he's bound to be wrong. Each man is a person unto himself, and you'll find good, bad, and indifferent wherever you go" (L'Amour, 1975, p. 24).

L'Amour's characters also exhibit perseverance. Many of his characters left their homes to start over in new lands – even though they knew it would be difficult. A strong work ethic was necessary to survive. Tell Sackett exclaims "...I'll not quit. It ain't because I've got more nerve than the next man, it's just that I'm not very smart. Nobody ever taught me when was the time to quit" (L'Amour, 1965, p. 99). Borden Chantry, a Sackett descendant, proudly states, "We Chantrys have a failing, we like to finish what we start. I know the history of my family for 200 years the way you know the trail to Santa Fe. And we've always finished what we started, or died in the trying" (L'Amour, 1975, p. 60).

Inspire a Shared Vision

L'Amour's characters viewed the west as a land of opportunity where anyone could succeed through hard work. They communicated this vision to others and gained followership due to the boldness of their vision and how they pursued their vision. Tyrell Sackett tells Orrin, "It's a big country with lots of room to spread out...it gives a man big ideas" (L'Amour, 1960, p. 35). Tom Sunday, a friend to Tyrell, noted "You're just as big or small as your vision is, and if you've a mind to work" (L'Amour, 1960, p. 41). Tyrell and Orrin sought to become ranch owners, not just ranch hands.

Challenging the Process

L'Amour's characters challenged the *status quo* throughout his novels. They often stood alone in their beliefs. As in the example of Borden Chantry, they spoke up when minorities were stereotyped or mistreated (L'Amour, 1975). They stood fast to their values. In *The Daybreakers*, Tyrell and Orrin Sackett, Cap Roundtree, and Tom Sunday come upon a burned-out wagon train with no survivors. Sunday observed that one of the burned wagons didn't look right. Upon inspection, it contained a false bottom with a strongbox inside. The box contained several thousand dollars and some letters, a find that would tempt anyone. "This is better than hunting cows," Sunday said, "We've got us a nice piece of money here." "Maybe somebody needs that money," Orrin suggested. "We'd better read those letters and see if we can find the owner." (L'Amour, 1960, p. 45). Orrin persisted until Tom Sunday agreed to send the money to its rightful owner. Many followers were attracted to the Sacketts because of their strong values and authenticity of living those values.

The women of L'Amour's novels are strong leadership role models. They are independent and resourceful, defying the stereotypes of women during that era. At the age of 16, Echo Sackett traveled hundreds of miles from her home in eastern Tennessee to Philadelphia to receive an inheritance (L'Amour, 1983). She traveled alone by foot, riverboat, and stagecoach. The lawyer holding her inheritance thought that he could swindle a naive country girl, but Echo proved to be shrewd. She made sure that the lawyer gave her the full inheritance, but was pursued by thieves hired by the lawyer on her way back to Tennessee. She capably eluded or disabled the thieves at every turn, much to the astonishment of the men sent to protect her. By living a self-sufficient lifestyle, she not only developed the knowledge and skills, but also the self-confidence to make her own way on the frontier of the 1840s. Echo Sackett challenged the stereotypes of women common to that time period.

Enabling Others to Act

Support for others who were trying to make their own way is a common theme in L'Amour's novels. In *The Cherokee Trail*, Major Breydon is killed on his way west to take over the management of a remote stage station on the infamous Cherokee Trail. His wife, Mary, assumes this job as the only means to support herself and her daughter. She has to fight the stereotype prevalent at the time that women were frail and lacked the

intelligence to run a business, especially one on the frontier. Such jobs were seen as too difficult and improper for women. Temple Boone encouraged Mary Breydon as she fired the existing station keeper, then fought off bandits and Indians who tried to steal her horses and do her physical harm. While giving her support, Boone allowed Mary to make her own decisions and deal with the consequences.

L'Amour's characters frequently provided a stake (small loan) for others who hoped to start a business or needed money to get them through a tough time. Such loans were made on the man's word alone. His characters always paid their good fortunes forward.

Encouraging the Heart

L'Amour's characters surrounded themselves with others who wanted settle the west and build new lives. They frequently encouraged these people by telling them "this country needs men like you." The Sackett family was especially good at encouraging each other. In *The Daybreakers*, Tyrell supported his brother, Orrin, when he ran for sheriff and later the legislature of the New Mexico Territory (L'Amour, 1960). The brothers' leadership influenced Cap Roundtree and Tom Sunday to settle.

Authenticity

L'Amour's characters were builders, not destroyers. They were rarely religious, but maintained moral values. They lived by a moral code that included never harming women, giving a full day's work for your wages, being self-reliant, and keeping your word. Trevallion, in *Comstock Lode*, delivered a mule-train of gold despite being severely wounded by Indians and being overdue to the buyer by a month (L'Amour, 1981). Not an ounce of gold was missing. In *Sackett's Land*, Flanigan and Galloway Sackett were building new lives in the West. When their father died, they returned home to Tennessee to pay his debt to a local store owner. Upon paying the debt, they turned around and headed back out West to continue building a better life. They assumed responsibility for a family debt and the honor of the family name.

Valued Family

L'Amour's characters had a strong sense of the importance of family. This was exhibited the most with the Sackett family. If a Sackett needed help, all other Sacketts came running. Family members need not have ever met each other to come to each other's aid. This value extended to neighbors as well. If someone had ever done a kindness to a Sackett, they could expect the kindness to be repaid if they were ever in need. Any Sackett family member could repay the kindness, not just the Sackett that was the beneficiary.

In *Sackett's Brand*, Tell Sackett's wife is murdered and he is almost killed as the murderer tries to hide his crime. Tell is hunted across the Mogollon Rim in Arizona by dozens of men. The word spreads to various Sackett family members who travel from across the country to help him. For example, when Orlando Sackett heard that a Sackett

was in trouble, he left immediately – from El Paso to Arizona (L'Amour, 1965). Nolan Sackett wore out three horses going to help Tell (L'Amour, 1965). Dozens of Sacketts came to Tell's aid and most had never met him. They just knew that a Sackett was in trouble and you dropped everything to help family.

Recommendation

Western fiction has the potential to engage students who may not see the relevance of many leadership theories or models. L'Amour's characters exhibit many leadership traits, behaviors, and skills that were just as essential in building our nation as they are in today's boardroom. His Sackett novels are especially effective in exhibiting Kouzes and Posner's (2008) Five Exemplary practices.

L'Amour's novels have sparked an interest in reading for many students in directed studies projects that, in turn, led them to read other genres and reflect on the leadership lessons contained within. Students not only focus on the knowledge and skills of the characters, but also examine the character's thinking process as they develop solutions to problems and expand their personal vision. I invite leadership educators to delve into the world of Louis L'Amour and engage students in exploring the leadership lessons his characters offer.

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