



What is Leadership?

Leaders address themselves to the wants and needs of followers as well as to their own.

Leadership. James MacGregor Burns. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.—Summary review by Ron Brandt, Executive Editor, *Educational Leadership*.

What makes leaders different? The distinguished political historian James MacGregor Burns says great leaders are sensitive to the fundamental needs and values of others. Author of prize-winning books about Franklin Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, John Kennedy, and others, Burns has written a new book about leadership itself.

Some educators might wonder about the applicability of political philosophy to the field of education, but Burns says leadership is leadership wherever you find it. Moreover, he says that leadership and education are ultimately similar because they both consist of "reciprocal raising of levels of motivation rather than indoctrination or coercion" (p. 448).

Burns traces the histories of giants—Mohandas Gandhi, Woodrow Wilson, Nikolai Lenin, Adolph Hitler—the first two true leaders in his view, the third a leader "whose theory of leadership had a fatal flaw," and the fourth "an absolute wielder of brutal power" (p. 27). Drawing upon theorists including Sigmund Freud, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Abraham Maslow, Burns develops a persuasive analysis of human behavior. Along the way, he recounts interesting anecdotes about such historical figures as Frederick the Great, Franklin Roosevelt, and Mao Tse-Tung. According to Burns:

- *Leadership is an aspect of power, but leaders differ from powerholders. Powerholders are concerned with achieving only their own goals, whereas leaders address themselves to the wants and needs of followers as well as to their own.*

- *Leadership may be transactional or transformational; simply an exchange of valued things with no enduring purpose, or an engagement in which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality.*

- *Moral leadership goes beyond everyday wants and needs to higher levels of reasoned, conscious values.*

- *Power and leadership are not concentrated in a few people but are widely distributed. "The vast preponderance of personal influence is exerted quietly and subtly in everyday relationships" (p. 442), so top leaders are more effective if they help their followers become leaders in their own right.*

- *Leadership can be taught in the sense that great teachers are leaders (and great leaders teachers); they "treat students neither coercively nor instrumentally but are joint seekers of truth and mutual actualization" (p. 449).*

In the last chapter, Burns turns modestly prescriptive, offering a few "rules" to guide prospective leaders. (See "Advice," p. 382.)

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