

## **BOOK REVIEW:**

# **TRUST AND INSPIRE: HOW TRULY GREAT LEADERS UNLEASH GREATNESS IN OTHERS, BY STEPHEN M. R. COVEY**

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In *Trust and Inspire: How Truly Great Leaders Unleash Greatness in Others* (Simon and Schuster, 2022), author Stephen M. R. Covey advocates for a “trust and inspire” approach to leadership rather than a “command and control” structure. Covey, who is the former chief executive officer of Covey Leadership Center, along with David Kasperson, McKinlee Covey, and Gary T. Judd describe what they mean by the trust and inspire approach, provide guidance on how to implement it, and present examples of leaders who have effectively used this approach. As Covey sums it up:

*If you're still trying to win by containing people instead of unleashing their potential, by motivating others instead of inspiring them, by focusing on competing and self-interest above caring and service — you're playing tennis with a golf club. (p. 11)*

## **OVERVIEW OF TRUST AND INSPIRE**

What does it mean to trust and inspire? Trust is when a leader believes that people will make good decisions and enables them to make those decisions. Inspire is when a leader encourages people to do their best work and make meaningful contributions. Both traits involve recognizing the value of intrinsic motivation and the potential for greatness. This is in contrast to a command and control approach where the people in charge focus only on compliance and task completion. Covey compares leaders who trust and inspire to a gardener who creates the conditions for a seed to grow.

Covey uses a simple example to illustrate these concepts. When he was seven years old, Covey's father made an agreement with him that he would be

responsible for keeping the family's yard "clean and green." His father indicated the neighbor's yard to communicate what "clean and green" meant but left the young Covey to figure out how to achieve that. He also assured his son that he would help him if he had time. His father had identified the desired end result, provided examples of approaches to consider (e.g., running the sprinklers, picking up debris), and then inspired and trusted his son to achieve the "clean and green" yard.

As you can imagine, seven-year-old Covey says that he had a bit of a rocky start, but following a gentle nudge and a desire to please his father, he was successful. Covey argues that people need more than being told what to do — they need to know the why behind the what. Rather than merely telling him to turn on the sprinklers twice a day, Covey's father emphasized the value of a "clean and green" yard. He had identified a meaningful way to convey to the young Covey the importance of contributing to the household. This resulted not only in a chore being done, but — more importantly — inspired his son and generated confidence and pride.

## **WHY THE TRUST AND INSPIRE APPROACH IS NEEDED**

Covey stresses how the nature of the world has changed. This includes an abundance of emerging knowledge, people having access to instant information, more employees working remotely, and a diverse workforce. He argues that the current environment calls for people to be innovative, creative, and collaborative, which can be achieved through a trust and inspire leadership approach.

Covey presents a relatable argument as to the positive impact of trusting in people. He encourages you to think of someone who trusted you and took a chance on you. He then says to think how that made you feel. It's likely it inspired you, and he says to think about how that trust has impacted your life.

## **STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

Covey provides guidance for those who want to become a leader who trusts and inspires. One tactic is having the leader "go first." This entails listening for understanding, admitting mistakes, taking responsibility for poor results, and promoting transparency through the elimination of hidden agendas. He also recommends that leaders develop a caring internal environment rather than

a competitive one and pursue a stewardship role that puts service above self-interest.

Rather than having lots of rules that are designed to specify how workers should act and respond, leaders should believe in and encourage their coworkers' abilities to use their judgment to make good decisions. Covey describes a singular rule in place at Nordstrom: "Use good judgment in all situations" (p. 227). He also refers to General Motors' remote work policy, which provides, "Where work permits, employees have the flexibility to work where they can have the greatest impact on achieving our goals" (p. 137). In discussing this policy, Covey notes the chief executive officer of General Motors said that employees are capable of "making smart decisions without overly prescriptive guidance" (p. 137).

Covey talks about how a stewardship agreement can be useful for remote work. It's a way of explicitly expressing expectations and committing to mutually agreed-upon priorities. A stewardship agreement can express the need for resources, how the worker will be held accountable, and the consequences of not obtaining the intended results.

According to Covey, one of the major challenges of becoming a trust and inspire leader is that many people think they have already made this transition. But while you may view your leadership approach as being consistent with the trust and inspire method, Covey points out, others may have different perspectives.

## **APPLICABILITY TO LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

Most of the examples provided in *Trust and Inspire* are based on the private sector. There is some discussion about leaders in the education field but little specifically on government leaders. The question becomes whether the trust and inspire approach is relevant and effective for public sector leaders, including municipal leaders.

Some aspects, such as helping workers understand the why behind actions and being part of a greater good, are closely related to municipal government. Indeed, being able to make a difference in the lives of others is one of the reasons people choose to work for a local government. They feel a sense of pride in providing important services, such as public safety, streets, and recreation. However, a leader still needs to develop a culture where the employees understand how

their position fits into the bigger picture of serving the public and improving the quality of life for community residents.

Does the trust part relate to municipal government as well? Yes, a similar case can be made for local governments as for other types of organizations. A leader identifies problems that need attention and then relies on their team and other coworkers to identify the approaches and resources needed to address them. This can draw on the creativity, expertise, and dedication of local government employees to make a contribution and have a sense of belonging.

For example, a mayor could identify the need to better communicate with the public about issues such as road closures or summer youth programs. Rather than specifying how this should be achieved, the mayor could rely on staff members to develop effective ways to problem-solve. The team would be entrusted to come up with ideas on how best to reach diverse populations in the community, such as younger or older residents, immigrants, or store owners. On this principle, Covey cites Ken Blanchard, author of *The One-Minute Manager*, who said, “None of us is as smart as all of us” (p. 246).

Covey also suggests minimizing the reliance on rules that constrain employees’ choices and instead encourage them to use their best judgment. While this recommendation has value in a municipal government, it needs to be viewed in a broader context of the policies underlying the rules. A government leader can certainly encourage a review of existing rules to assess which ones are outdated or too constraining. However, particularly in municipal government, certain rules are needed to support policies in areas such as hiring, procurement, and spending public funds. Rather than leaving those decisions up to judgment, having top-level rules in the public sector ensures accountability, fairness, and adherence to legal mandates. For example, a public works supervisor may believe that his brother-in-law’s firm could remove a road safety hazard in a timely and effective manner, but the city public works director would expect that supervisor to rely on the city’s pre-approved list of qualified contractors and avoid showing favoritism.

Covey stresses that leaders should seek collaboration among interconnected teams rather than trying to coordinate functional silos. This, too, is applicable to governments, which traditionally may have relied on departments as the main focal point. The complexities of today’s opportunities and challenges, which involve issues such as public safety, economic development, technology,

and employee recruitment and retention, call for using the expertise and talents of municipal employees from multiple departments.

Lastly, Covey recognizes the importance of innovation and the willingness to allow for failure as a way to learn and improve. This can be a challenging issue for governments that may be risk-averse and prefer proven practices. Municipal leaders often seek a balance between trying new approaches that may lead to better results versus not taking undue risks that can adversely impact people or result in less confidence in the government as a provider of reliable services.

## **BOX 1**

### **QUOTES FROM *TRUST AND INSPIRE***

- “A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader; a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves.” — Eleanor Roosevelt (p. 9)
- “May you live long enough to know why you were born.” — Cherokee birth blessing (p. 157)
- “Always assume positive intent. Whatever anybody says or does, assume positive intent. You will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different.” — Indra Nooyi, Former CEO PepsiCo (p. 66)
- “I truly believe that each of us must find meaning in our work. The best work happens when you know that it’s not just work, but something that will improve people’s lives.” — Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft (p. 179)

## **LIMITATIONS OF COVEY’S BOOK**

Covey and his team make a compelling case for switching from “command and control” to “trust and inspire,” but the basic components of “trust and inspire” may not strike the reader as new or insightful. Throughout the book, Covey integrates material from other leadership theories and books. For example, he discusses Maslow’s hierarchy of needs from 1943, which includes recognition

of higher level of needs including belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. (Maslow later added self-transcendence.) Covey also references Daniel Pink's book *Drive*, which stresses the need to move beyond extrinsic rewards because they focus more on conditioning than developing people's potential. Covey also has a previous book titled *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (Free Press, 2006) that already provides an in-depth discussion of how to develop and inspire trust.

*Trust and Inspire* also discusses the importance of collaboration but does not provide much new material on how to achieve that. This is an especially important issue given the increase in the number of employees who are working remotely for at least a portion of their workweek. It would have been helpful for Covey to include explicit examples of trust and inspire leaders who have effectively achieved effective collaboration among teams.

Another limitation of Covey's book is that most of the examples of successful leaders are from the private sector. Covey misses an opportunity to highlight successful governmental and nonprofit leaders and discuss how the trust and inspire approach can be used in these sectors.

Covey's book also falls short in terms of rigorously supporting its claims with well-documented research studies. For example, Covey states: "Wherever there is greatness, wherever there is achievement, wherever there is success — you can find a trust and inspire leader" (p. 298). The reader is left with questions such as whether Covey has cherry-picked trust and inspire leaders who are successful as opposed to other leaders who employ the trust and inspire approach but are less successful or other leaders who use alternative methods that are equally successful.

## CONCLUSION

Like other popular books on leadership, Covey's book offers important points for consideration. The main one is that people in leadership should consider employing trust and inspire characteristics and move away from a command and control environment. *Trust and Inspire* presents a framework and guiding principles for how to be someone who successfully trusts and inspires others. The value of this type of book is that it encourages its readers to reflect on their own values and beliefs, the manner in which they relate to others, and their overall leadership philosophy and approach.

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