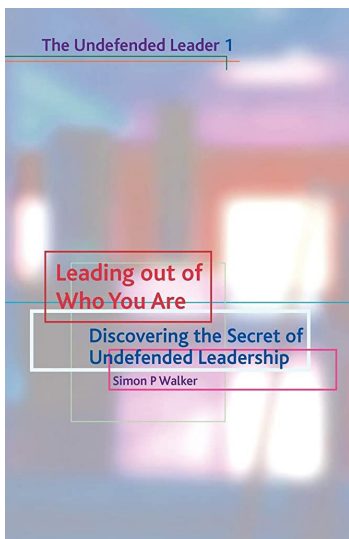


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Walker

Simon Walker teaches Leadership at Oxford University. He runs courses for social leaders within the corporate, educational, and not-for-profit sectors in the United Kingdom. He also heads up The Leadership Community, an international network of social leaders committed to undefended leadership.

Leading Out of Who You Are

THE NUTSHELL

Although I had followed Jesus for nearly a decade and was involved in Christian leadership, my understanding of power and leadership were still basically informed not by the life and death of the man I followed but by the values of the playground, the sports field and the market.

There is another possible approach—undefended leadership. At the summit of the leadership mountain can be found a few extraordinary individuals whose occupation and application of power is of a different order altogether. These are the leaders whose lives and philosophies have involved deliberate acts of weakness and courageous self-sacrifice. Up there we find the likes of Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, and Jesus of Nazareth. It is these undefended leaders who are the most effective leaders and are associated with the greatest revolutions.

What exactly makes an undefended leader? Is there something that these great ones have in common? To answer these questions, we need to consider the particular nature of the task of leadership. Leadership is about who you are, not what you know or what skills you have.

In a sense, Leaders live in a hostile world. They often experience things that other people experience to a much lesser degree: their lives are lived under a spotlight, often unrealistically idealized and with tremendous pressure to perform; other people seek to meet their needs through them; they have a different level of corporate responsibility.

The end result is often a sense that we leaders can't really trust the people around us, so we need to manage what they see of us. It can be a tremendous

Leading Out of Who You Are

relief for a leader to finally “come clean” and let people see what really is happening. People will often begin to confide about their own failings, doubts, and discouragements. People only become undefended—they only stop protecting themselves—when they feel safe.

As long as we fear for our job, our salary, our reputation, our popularity, our credibility, our wealth, or our control, we cannot be truly free in our leadership. We will defend ourselves against the loss of the asset we value most. Only the person who is secure against the loss of all these things can be truly free. The secret of effective leadership is the freedom to live an undefended life.

How do we defend ourselves? Sometimes we present an image instead of letting people see who we really are. Other times we exercise power or control in a way that minimizes risk (to us). Either way, we are not really free if we are working to protect ourselves from pain.

Freedom comes from knowing that you are approved of. Freedom to perform comes from the knowledge that there is someone rooting for you, whose opinion you value more than anyone else’s. Indeed, you can perform with nothing to lose, because you are secure that your identity, your future and well-being, does not depend on the quality of your performance.

Often this is the result of pain and struggle. In a place of struggle, we are forced to choose: whether we see our pain as pointless agony, or as a period of growth, possibly even transformation, in which a deeper and bigger Presence accompanies us. We choose if we are going to be motivated by anger or love. Oppressed by loss—of our role, our job, our health, a loved one, etc—we are forced to come to know ourselves, not as people defined by such things but as people who choose not to be overcome. It’s the presence of, and our relationship with, another that enables us to persevere in the journey.

Someone who goes through times of deep pain, loss, and struggle and comes out on the other side knowing who they are, knowing that their pain had a purpose, and operating out of love rather than anger, often has tremendous moral authority.

This kind of leadership does not offer easy promises or wide, open roads; rather, it recognizes and embraces a future of obstacles and opposition. Such leadership requires the leader to be in a place of personal security, where their own success, comfort, reputation, and popularity do not impinge upon their purpose and direction, where they are genuinely free to “lose” their personal status to achieve the greater goal of leading others to freedom. They are free because their identity doesn’t depend on their success; and, they are followed because everyone else recognizes this to be the case. Their moral authority, forged in the flames, is clear for all to see.

People with this kind of authority often lead in a different way. Rather than focusing solely on accomplishing goals or objectives, their leadership is about enabling others to identify and embrace who they are. It is helping someone else to come to understand what their unique and specific calling in the world may involve, and even how to step into it. It is about setting people free.

I want to suggest that the ultimate goal of leadership is this: to enable people to take responsibility for their lives and move towards fully mature, responsible personhood. In other words, the goal is for both the leader and the follower to be changed. It is to learn through our experiences who we are—what it means to be courageous, to be real, to be fully human. True leadership is leading ourselves and others into this kind of life: embracing our full humanity, and participating fully in the world.