



Leadership Lessons from Game of Thrones

Here's a quick quiz: Which of the following quotes is from a Business School professor, and which was said in the epic fantasy *Game of Thrones*?

1. "Your values are your internal control system."
2. "Truth now."
3. "Think through a problem and gain greater self-awareness in the process."
4. "Once you've accepted your flaws, no one can use them against you."

The answers are at the end of the article, but the point of the quiz should already be apparent: More than a television show, *Game of Thrones* offers a trove of leadership lessons for managing groups and implementing change.

To mark *Game of Thrones* launching its eighth and final season this spring, here are eight management lessons from the Emmy-winning drama, drawing on insights from Craven and many of his colleagues, including faculty members Paul Ingram, Sheena Iyengar, Adam Galinsky, Bob Bontempo, and Rita McGrath.

1. Know Your Values

"Leaders have an obligation to understand the challenges and opportunities presented by our values," according to Craven. Failing to do so can have dire consequences, as seen in season one of GoT with the character of Ned Stark, who finds himself undermined by his inability to see how his personal values of duty and honor make him vulnerable to being exploited in the seedy capital of King's Landing.

Identifying one's values is also a key part of the School's Executive Education Advanced Management Program, which guides executives through a process of recognizing their values hierarchy as a way of gaining perspective on personal drive, motivation, and fulfillment. "Your values are your internal control system," according to Kravis Professor of Business Paul Ingram. "When moments of crises occur, we rarely have time to explore options and consider alternatives in any depth, it is our core values that we rely on to guide us."

2. Build Trust

In failing to align his values with the people around him, Ned Stark also fails at building trust with key leaders, which is how he finds himself surrounded by enemies. How can trust be built? One way is to unite around a common enemy. "From the diplomatic stage to the boardroom, a common threat can create some truly odd bedfellows as former adversaries shift gears to cooperate with each other," according to *Friend & Foe* by Maurice Schweitzer and Adam Galinsky, the Vikram S. Pandit Professor of Business. Another trust-building tactic is to signal competence and warmth by demonstrating concern and willingness to share private information.

Craven highlights how the character Tyrion Lannister builds trust with a potentially dangerous woman named Daenerys Targaryen by revealing little-known details about his life and uniting them around a shared enemy. He also overcomes the *low-power double bind*, which is when a person with low power is ignored for failing to speak up, but is also reprimanded for speaking too loudly. To get out of this bind, according to Galinsky, one should signal flexibility: by providing people with a choice, you can lower their defense. Tyrion does just this by illustrating how it is Daenerys' choice to kill him or accept him into her circle.

3. Be Authentic

Aligning your values with your leadership role will also increase your authenticity, and therefore your trustworthiness, according to a study by Ingram with S. T. Lee Professor of Business Sheena Iyengar and London Business School's Yoonjin Choi. "Leaders who are 'true to their core values' are authentic because their actions are motivated by their core values and therefore, are self-determined," the researchers wrote in their 2017 paper, "The Authenticity Challenge."

"Values affirmation makes values-based motivation salient for leaders and therefore makes leaders more focused on their core values when communicating their decisions to followers as well as when they are implementing new policy," according to Ingram, Iyengar, and Choi.

4. Develop Empathy

Tyrion Lannister also exemplifies someone with deep empathy, which contributes to his high emotional intelligence quotient (EQ). This trait allows him to see people from multiple perspectives and forge alliances. It is also a skill taught at the Business School.

"In order to get what you want, you need to understand how other people see you," according to *A Primer on Personal Development* (Columbia Caseworks) by Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Professor of Business Daniel Ames, Associate Professor Malia Mason, and Dana Carney of

Berkeley-Haas. An estimated 9 in 10 high-performers are high in EQ, underscoring the importance of empathy in building partnerships and strengthening colleagues' motivation.

While our IQ is fixed, we can improve our EQ, notes Craven. He cites an EQ growth-moment for the character Jamie Lannister in season three, when Jamie realizes that he admires a female knight named Brienne of Tarth and chooses to defend her—a notable change from his normally selfish and aloof personality.

5. Network

Tyrion Lannister uses EQ to network and build alliances, which is essential to his successes. “I try to know as many people as I can,” Tyrion says. “You never know which one you’ll need.”

According to former Business School associate professor Ko Kuwabara, who now teaches at INSEAD in Singapore, leaders need to build networking into their everyday routines. “Networking has to be like exercising: habitual (i.e., long-term, strategic, and semi-automatic),” according to Kuwabara’s *Building Success Habits: Networking and the Science of Self-Change* (Columbia Caseworks).

6. Be Persuasive

The character of Jon Snow learns to be persuasive—and suffers greatly when he lacks the ability to shake people from a so-called *latitude of rejection* where they are unwilling to accept change. “Jon stumbles in a critical leadership moment because he underestimates the potential backlash of resistance on his team,” Craven writes in *Win or Die*. “Jon Snow attempted to order his men to follow his solution... Professionally, we are often like Jon Snow. We believe it’s time to win through facts when we need to win through persuasion.”

To be persuasive, according to Adjunct Professor Bob Bontempo, a leader must rouse followers into a *latitude of acceptance* where they are willing to reflect on options and potentially accept change. In this setting, persuasion is not necessarily about a hard negotiation or about presentation of facts, but rather about simply convincing someone to embrace an idea.

7. Think Strategically

Jon Snow faces a fast-approaching non-human threat from the north as well as insurrection among his own ranks. He must think strategically, which is an expertise of Professor of Practice Willie Pietersen. According to his book *Strategic Learning*, strategy must answer four questions: Where will we compete? What do we want to achieve? How will we win? What are our key priorities?

Pietersen advocates for developing strategy first, followed by plans to support the strategy. Failure to differentiate the two can cause confusion and all-out rebellion, as Jon Snow finds from his perch at Castle Black in the wintry north of Westeros.

8. Be Adaptable

Only the adaptable, flexible characters survive in *Game of Thrones*, be it from learning to fight left-handed or learning how to enter the minds of animals. Adapting only becomes imperative, however, when managers realize the need for change—an area of expertise for Executive Education faculty member Rita McGrath.

“I see a lot of denial in organizations whose main business models are shifting underneath them, and yet their executives simply don’t want to be exposed to this information,” McGrath [wrote in her newsletter](#). A business should be looking to constantly adapt and reconfigure itself through questioning its performance, including by asking: Am I gaining exposure to diverse perspectives? Am I trusting and empowering small teams? Am I making sure I’m not in denial?

Craven highlights the need for adaptability with a business lesson from the making of *Games of Thrones*. When first developing the show, the creators screened the multi-million-dollar pilot episode for a small working group and heard the response of: “You have a massive problem.” The episode was horrible, throwing the show’s entire future into question. The show’s creators adapted—and showed humility—by going back to HBO for more money to reshoot the pilot. The rest is history.

CREDIT: Bruce Craven and Colleagues

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