

# **LESSONS FROM THE TOP**

How successful leaders tell stories  
to get ahead – and stay there

**Gavin Esler**

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# A Message for the Reader

Everyone tells stories. It's one of the ways we connect with our friends and families. It's how we impress people when we apply for jobs and university places. It's what we do on Facebook and Twitter, and even how we go about the business of dating and finding a partner. Leaders tell stories too. They do so to attract, impress, control and retain their followers. Leaders have to possess many different skills, but without the ability to tell stories, they would have no followers and would cease to lead anyone. This book is about the power of such stories, based largely on leaders I have met. It is also about the great changes which have taken place in the kinds of stories leaders now feel they must tell in order to impress us in the twenty-first century.

We shall hear about 'leadership stories', the stories a leader tells, or asks his friends and followers to tell on his behalf. We shall move on to consider 'counter-stories', the stories told by enemies and opponents aimed at shattering the leader's image. We shall also consider 'pre-stories', the judgements we all make, for good or ill, before we meet someone, and which often need to be overcome if the leader is to impress us. We shall encounter storytelling techniques, including STAR moments – 'Something They Always Remember' about the leader or storyteller – and also what the Germans call the *Ohrwurm*, the 'earwig' which wriggles in your ear like the chorus of a pop song and which, however annoying, you just cannot forget. We shall come to understand how leaders, like novelists or Hollywood scriptwriters, hook us on the stories

they tell by ‘violating expectations’, as some psychologists call it – telling us something surprising which makes us look at them in a different light, and which may or may not actually be true.

Throughout *Lessons from the Top* we shall learn which words to use and which to avoid when telling a leadership story. We shall understand how some leaders and their advisers use pictures to tell a story in a way that is more powerful than words, and how the use of pictures can deliberately mislead. We shall learn how a leader shapes a story from his or her origins to his achievements and then to the kind of leadership he intends to offer. We shall also learn why ‘authenticity’ is more important than ‘truth’ – and how ‘authenticity’ can be faked. And we shall come to understand how and why so many leaders try to persuade us that they are simultaneously ‘just like us’ while also being ‘better than us’, and therefore fit to lead.

All successful leadership stories involve three parts. First, the leader has to explain ‘**Who am I?**’, as a person. Then he or she outlines ‘**Who are we?**’ as a group to followers or potential followers. Finally the leader tells us ‘**Where will my leadership take us?**’ in our common purpose. A convincing leader will make these stories buzz in our heads in a way that is unforgettable. In modern democracies, with varying degrees of enthusiasm and skill, leaders will accept some kind of scrutiny from the media. But they also rise to the top by manipulating the coverage they receive on television and in newspapers, along with managing Twitter, Facebook and other storytelling tools, deciding when and how to appear, how much of their ‘real’ lives to share, and controlling the environment in which they will allow their leadership stories to be questioned. Throughout we will examine how profound changes to the media in the twenty-first century have transformed the kinds of stories leaders tell, or believe they need to tell, to impress their followers. This has already brought about a change in the kinds of leaders we have, and those who will emerge in the future.

This book, then, takes lessons in storytelling from the very top and offers them to those of us who aspire to lead, to do better in

our careers or to prosper in our personal lives. Even if we do not aspire to a position of leadership, we are all followers of something or someone, of an ideal, a philosophy or religion, a football team, a rock star, a political party, a brand of computer, a fashion trend. Leaders are as selfish as the rest of us, perhaps more so. The stories they tell us are designed to make them look good. Such stories may be in the leader's best interests but they may not necessarily be in ours. This book offers all of us the keys to understanding, interpreting and, at times, debunking the stories leaders try to tell us and the ways they often mislead us for their benefit.

We are all storytellers, all followers, and often we are leaders in some way, or at least we aspire to lead. As we come to understand more about the storytelling process, I hope you will agree that, above all, *Lessons from the Top* is itself full of powerful stories.

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# 1 Lessons from the Top

*Behind every great leader there is always a great story. Even not-so-great leaders understand the need to engage and impress their followers, customers, voters or audiences. They do it most effectively by telling stories about themselves, their origins, their vision and beliefs.*

A leader must have many qualities. Vision, persistence, idealism, energy, determination, risk-taking, commitment and enthusiasm are among the most obvious. But a person may possess all those skills and more, and yet never be a leader. The indispensable skill for all leaders in business, politics, sport or any significant field of human endeavour is the ability to create followers and communicate effectively with them. All leadership demands followership. Whatever his or her other qualities, leaders or potential leaders will never have followers without the ability to articulate who they are, who they consider their followers to be as a group, where their views and expertise come from, and why, above all others, he or she is the right person to lead.

Bill Clinton understands the power of stories. That's why he managed to win the US presidency in 1992, transforming the Democratic Party from losers to winners, and how, against the odds, he came to survive the sex scandal over his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Nelson Mandela also understands the power of stories. That's why, when he faced going to jail in apartheid South Africa, he turned up in court wearing the traditional clothes of the

Xhosa people, an African man representing his people against a white power structure. And that's also why as president of post-apartheid South Africa, Mandela attended the 1995 rugby World Cup Final wearing the Springbok shirt. The Springboks had long been a symbol of white supremacy. On Mandela's back the shirt immediately became a new symbol of inclusion, of a 'rainbow nation' and of a new kind of African leader. The shirt, like the Xhosa national dress, was not just an item of clothing. It was a storytelling device. In their very different ways Clinton, Mandela, Margaret Thatcher, Barack Obama, the British royal family and even terrorist leaders and organisations like Osama Bin Laden and the IRA all know that telling stories is the bridge between them and their followers, the essential connection that makes successful leadership possible.

During my years of travelling round the world, when I met Bill Clinton or Jimmy Carter, prime ministers and presidents, even monarchs like Queen Elizabeth II and King Abdullah II of Jordan, people would always ask me the same question: what is he, or she, really like? Generally they would not be asking about policies or ideas. Instead, they wanted to hear stories that captured the 'real' leader, his or her 'character'. The most effective leaders understand that these stories transcend matters of policy. Storytelling is how their leadership is often defined.

## **The Great Communicator**

Let's begin by looking at Ronald Reagan, a US president of the type widely patronised and disliked in Europe, caricatured as a 'cowboy' and seen by many Americans to be divisive at home during his terms in office. When people asked me what he was like, I would normally answer without discussing his policies at all. Reagan's funding of armed counter-revolutionaries in Nicaragua, the Iran-Contra scandal which almost destroyed his presidency, supply-side economics, or his reputation in Europe as a warmonger, were the stories I reported as a journalist on



television every day, but they were not, generally, what people want to hear as a guide to the 'real' man behind the public image.

Instead, people would ask about Reagan's quirky sense of humour, his relaxed attitude to his job, his love for dogs, or the way he handled the assassination attempt which almost ended his life. I would respond with stories Reagan's deputy chief of staff Michael Deaver told me, or from other friends and White House contacts who saw Reagan frequently. Reagan's leadership story, Deaver always said, was that of a man comfortable in his own skin. For all the roiling public controversies over his policies, Reagan communicated an air of calm to everyone around him in the White House, and through his mastery of television, to the American people. As president, Reagan would stroll in to the Oval Office after a good breakfast, around nine in the morning. He would put in a few hours' work, then spend time with his wife Nancy in the late afternoon, leaving his staff to do their jobs. Sometimes he would take a nap after lunch. Not only did Reagan like dogs, but some of his pets were what Deaver called 'untrained mutts'. One morning at around nine o'clock, the president of the United States, with mutt in tow, breezed into the Oval Office and asked his high-powered team what was happening. There had been an urgent foreign policy crisis and the top players from the president's staff had worked through the night. They were tired and tetchy. By the time Reagan arrived, his advisers had spent many hours in earnest discussion, telephoning foreign capitals and checking military deployments. The dog began running excitedly round the room.

'Mr President,' one of the top aides snapped through gritted teeth, 'one day that dog is going to piss on your desk.'

There was a short pause. Silence in the Oval Office.

'Well, everyone else does,' Reagan responded. The dog continued to misbehave. The staff went back to work.

Not long afterwards, a friend of mine, a Washington-based TV cameraman, was scheduled to film Reagan at the White House.

The cameraman was the proud owner of a King Charles spaniel, the same breed owned by the Reagans. The interview was, as usual, slotted into a long day of official meetings which tended to bore the president, occasionally to the point of slumber. This interview took place in the Roosevelt Room, and when it was over Reagan bade farewell to the TV crew. At that point my friend showed him a picture of his daughter holding her pet spaniel. Reagan was clearly delighted but his aides ushered him away to his next appointment. The crew began to de-rig the TV equipment. Fifteen minutes later, Ronald Reagan re-entered the room, alone.

‘Where’s the man with a doggie like my little doggie?’ Reagan enquired. My friend was astonished. Reagan produced a photograph showing him with his own dog. He signed the picture and handed it over, then the men in grey suits returned to the Roosevelt Room and took the most powerful man in the world back to the dreariness of his chores.

My friend never forgot this simple act. He told everyone he knew, who told everyone they knew, and now I am telling you. I suspect this story will stick in your mind, as it does in mine, while precise details of the Iran-Contra scandal, the Star Wars programme or Reagan’s supply-side economics may fade. The big decisions leaders have to take, the policies they advocate, are often too complicated for us to fret about. Sometimes, as with Reagan, these policies may be considered divisive and contentious. But even a child understands what it means to be kind to dogs and gracious towards a visitor. As followers or potential followers, we tend to care more about character, judgement and temperament than we do about the minutiae of the decisions our leaders take. Successful leaders, or potential leaders in any field of human endeavour, understand this.

In Reagan’s case, he and his team used such stories deftly to his political advantage. He once met a young foreign correspondent, a friend of mine, who sported a fine beard. At the end of their discussions my friend happened to mention that he would need to

shave off his beard before returning to his office because his editor-in-chief had banned beards, considering them unprofessional. Reagan, who loved stories, clearly enjoyed this one. A few weeks later my friend was phoned by his editor-in-chief who demanded to know what he had said to the president. The editor-in-chief had been attacking the Reagan administration for being right wing and illiberal. Reagan responded that all that might be true, but at least he allowed a guy to wear a beard if he wanted to.

Now, it is not the purpose of this book to argue whether Reagan was or was not a good president, whether his policies were the right ones, or whether any of the leaders here were good or bad. That depends on your view of politics and world affairs. But Reagan certainly was a great communicator, one of the greatest tellers of a leadership story I have ever encountered, both privately in these examples, and publicly while in the White House. I suspect that stories about dogs and beards, like many other tales of Reagan's good humour, encouraged many Americans to think of him as a decent person, whatever their judgement about his policies and legacy. The important point is that such stories are generally not accidents. They are often created, massaged and retold to impress us about the leader's character and to encourage us to like and to follow him. In Reagan's case, it worked. Such stories helped him to be elected twice to the presidency, and to survive a profound scandal which could have driven him from office.

Ronald Reagan's image was crafted every day by the White House machine. When Reagan was shot and seriously wounded, we learned that he joked to doctors that he hoped they were all Republicans. He told his wife of the shooting: 'Honey, I forgot to duck' (a quote from an American boxer). These stories, told, retold and embellished by the Reagan team, made the president's character and temperament seem ideal for the Oval Office, even when we later learned that privately his staff considered him often inattentive, distracted and ageing fast.

Reagan's infirmities became part of the 'counter-story', that is,

the negative stories used by his opponents and enemies to attack the Reagan presidency. The Reagan team knew such stories needed to be dealt with. As one member of Congress joked with me at the time: ‘The president is deaf, falls asleep in Cabinet meetings and does not know what is going on. Thank goodness he is not running the country.’ Significantly, that member of Congress, although a political opponent, admitted that he really ‘liked the guy’.

### **The Leadership Paradox**

Most modern leaders understand that there is a paradox at the heart of leadership. It goes back to the beginnings of democracy in ancient Greece. We want our leaders to be ‘just like us’, like Reagan with his dogs – the Greek word was ‘*idiotes*’, meaning ‘private person, layperson’ (although potentially edged with contempt to suggest those not interested in politics) – but we also want them to demonstrate that they are ‘better than us’, so they can deserve the privileges of leadership, which the Greeks called ‘*metrios*’. As John F. Kennedy’s biographer Robert Dallek put it, Americans today want simultaneously to mythologise and to debunk their presidents. We want our leaders to understand and have the interests of ordinary people at heart, but we would prefer that they avoid the weaknesses, vices and frailties of the rest of us. As the American presidential candidate Ross Perot told me repeatedly, Americans want to think that their leaders have boarded a plane, eaten a bad meal and lost their luggage, rather than being mollycoddled in first class or in a private jet. We want to look up to leaders, but also to feel that they are in some way our equals. And that paradox is where leadership stories come in. That’s where the leaders shape the facts of their lives to impress us, connect with us emotionally and make us like them. That’s also where they lie and cheat, telling what Huckleberry Finn called ‘stretchers’, distorting the truth to suit their own purposes, rather than ours.

As we will see, throughout history leaders and their followers

have always understood the power of such stories and counter-stories. Sometimes these can be effectively summed up in a word, phrase or headline. Jesus of Nazareth was ‘the Son of God’, but he was also ridiculed in the counter-story as ‘the King of the Jews’. England’s Queen Elizabeth I was ‘the Virgin Queen’ who turned a negative counter-story – that she was without a husband and hence without an heir – into a positive leadership story by insisting that she was married to her country. Catherine the Great, Charles the Great, William the Conqueror (Guillaume le Conquérant was formerly Guillaume le Bâtard, or William the Bastard – now *there’s* a sharp bit of rebranding), Richard the Lionheart, and Edward I, the ‘Hammer of the Scots’, all recognised that even a monarch who might assert the divine right of kings still needed a leadership story of some kind to impress his or her subjects, rival monarchs and perhaps ambitious nobles in court. It’s true of more modern rulers too. Bismarck was ‘the Iron Chancellor’; Mussolini and Hitler ‘Il Duce’ and ‘der Führer’ (the Leader) respectively. North Korea’s Kim Jong-il was variously ‘Dear Leader’, ‘Our Father’ and ‘the General’; Haile Selassie was ‘the Lion’ of Ethiopia; and so on. As the historian Mark Mazower points out in *Dark Continent* the twentieth century, at least from 1914 to the end of the Cold War in 1989, was a period when the survival of the institution of democracy appeared to be in doubt.

But since 1989 democracies, with all their flaws, have flourished from Brazil to Greece, Spain to Turkey, Chile to Tunisia and Peru. The collapse of communism has meant that political differences since 1989 tend to be about practicalities and effectiveness – ‘what works’ – not grand contests between competing ideologies. Consequently, democratic elections are sometimes disparaged as beauty contests for ugly people. Those who depend upon the popular vote have needed to be especially energetic in trying to implant in our minds versions of their leadership story, because ‘Who am I?’ often makes them stand out more than relatively minor policy differences.