

Themes of Leadership:
Empathy, Authenticity, Ownership, and Courage

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Leadership in the twenty-first century is increasingly measured by the quality of a leader's relationships rather than by the authority of their position. This essay examines that shift through four leaders who arrive at it from very different directions. Jacinda Ardern, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand, demonstrates leadership grounded in empathy and public authenticity during national crisis. Oprah Winfrey demonstrates transformational leadership exercised through platform, storytelling, and the deliberate use of her own history. Jocko Willink, a former United States Navy SEAL officer, argues from a military background for accountability, discipline, and humility. Brené Brown, a social work researcher, makes the empirical case that vulnerability, courage, and trust are the foundations of effective leadership rather than obstacles to it.

Taken together these four suggest that empathy and accountability are not competing leadership styles but complementary ones. The essay proceeds thematically rather than person by person, examining empathy, authenticity, and transformational vision in the work of Ardern and Winfrey, then turning to Willink's account of extreme ownership and Brown's research on vulnerability and trust, before considering what a leader might reasonably take from all four.

The Origin of the Question

In her characteristic style of blending wisdom with directness, Oprah Winfrey once offered a piece of leadership advice that names the problem precisely: channel your own inner Jacindas (Winfrey, 2019). The reference is to Jacinda Ardern, and Winfrey's statement points to a change in how effective leadership is understood. Ardern is recognized for a calm, caring, and open manner that differs markedly from a leadership style organized around

authority and control rather than around relationships. The question this essay pursues is what, concretely, that advice asks a leader to do.

Empathy: Leading With Compassion and Connection

A defining aspect of Ardern's leadership is her sense of empathy. During major national and international crises, including the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic, Ardern consistently demonstrated an ability to connect genuinely with the feelings of the people she served. She led with compassion rather than command. In her address to Parliament following the Christchurch attacks she said of the Muslim community, "They were New Zealanders. They are us" (Ardern, 2019). She wore a headscarf when visiting victims' families, symbolizing solidarity and respect. Her conduct demonstrated that empathy is not merely a gentle skill; it is a force that supports healing, builds trust, and brings people together.

Winfrey has long championed the same value, describing leadership as fundamentally a matter of empathy: the capacity to connect with and understand others genuinely in order to inspire and improve their lives. Empathy in this sense is not feeling sorry for someone. It is putting oneself in another person's position, understanding what they need, and responding with kindness.

Empathetic leadership builds trust. Leaders are not above the people they serve; they are alongside them. Both Ardern and Winfrey demonstrate that empathy does not weaken authority but strengthens it, by aligning leadership with human experience. In a world characterized by diversity and interconnection, empathy is no longer optional but necessary (Goleman, 2006).

Authenticity: The Power of Being Real

At a time when many leaders are perceived as disconnected or performative, Ardern stood out as someone who was recognizably herself. She was not afraid to show her human side

publicly, whether appearing in a sweatshirt during COVID-19 briefings or speaking openly about the difficulty of being both a mother and a head of government. Her transparency created a sense of closeness with citizens, who trusted her not because she projected perfection but because she was real.

Winfrey built her career and her leadership reputation on the same foundation. Her path from poverty and hardship to global media figure demonstrates the power of sharing one's own story openly. Accepting the Cecil B. DeMille Award, she told her audience that "speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all have" (Winfrey, 2018). She encourages leaders not to pretend but to own their stories, their flaws, and their growth. Authenticity does not mean a lack of professionalism or boundaries; it means aligning action with values and remaining consistent between words and behavior. Both leaders show that vulnerability, balanced with strength and competence, produces deeper loyalty.

Transformational Leadership: Inspiring Change Through Vision and Values

Winfrey exemplifies transformational leadership by inspiring and empowering people through her platform. Through The Oprah Winfrey Show, the OWN Network, and her philanthropic work, she built an enterprise focused not only on entertainment but on personal growth and social change. She has mentored emerging leaders and used her influence to confront injustice. Her leadership changes lives through a sense of purpose rather than through authority.

A transformational leader elevates those around them. They are not satisfied with maintaining conditions as they are; they intend to change them. Ardern and Winfrey share an ability to lead from a place of clarity, compassion, and conviction, demonstrating that leadership is not about titles but about impact. To channel one's own inner Jacindas, then, is to lead with the heart while still respecting the mind. It means showing up completely and honestly, even when

doing so is uncomfortable, and understanding that the most durable leadership is built not on fear but on earned trust.

Extreme Ownership: Lessons From Jocko Willink

Willink's TEDx talk "Extreme Ownership" presents a leadership approach built on three ideas: accountability, discipline, and humility. Willink argues that leaders must fully accept responsibility for how their team performs. When they acknowledge their own mistakes, even where others contributed to the problem, they build trust and create a culture in which everyone feels responsible (TEDx Talks, 2017).

His formulation that discipline equals freedom captures how self-control produces better planning, organization, and action, and ultimately greater latitude rather than less (Willink & Babin, 2017). Humility completes the picture. Willink observes that ego damages teamwork, whereas humble leaders remain open to feedback, willing to learn, and better able to empower those around them (TEDx Talks, 2017).

Together these principles describe a leadership approach that is mission-focused, attentive to people, and grounded in personal accountability. Willink's ideas apply well beyond the military and offer practical strategies for leading with honesty, trust, and clear purpose.

Vulnerability and Trust: Lessons From Brené Brown

Brown reframes leadership around vulnerability, courage, empathy, and trust. She argues that vulnerability is not weakness but the core of genuine leadership, since it means being willing to take emotional risks and to remain open to mistakes and to feedback (Brown, 2012). Courage means prioritizing honesty and doing the right thing when it is uncomfortable, including holding difficult but necessary conversations (Brown, 2018).

Empathy, in Brown's account, is essential to building connection and a sense of belonging, because it allows leaders to understand and support others without judgment (Brown, 2010). She further argues that trust develops through small, everyday moments, and explains this through her BRAVING framework, which emphasizes boundaries, reliability, accountability, and integrity among its components (Brown, 2018).

Overall, Brown holds that effective leadership is rooted in emotional awareness and the willingness to be present, visible, and caring. Some leaders motivate through emotional connection, empathy, and trust; others lead by being accountable, organized, and decisive.

Conclusion

The four leaders examined here appear at first to represent different traditions. Arden and Winfrey lead through empathy, authenticity, and vision; Willink leads through ownership and discipline; Brown grounds both in research on vulnerability and trust. What they share is more significant than what separates them. Each locates the source of a leader's authority in something other than position: in the willingness to be genuinely present with people, to take responsibility rather than assign it, and to be honest about limitation.

The strongest leaders are those who understand themselves, adapt their approach when circumstances require it, and create environments where people feel valued, safe, and empowered. Leadership of this kind begins with self-knowledge and rests on a sincere commitment to others, whether it takes the form of courage, humility, vulnerability, or accountability. Taken together, these approaches make it possible to lead not only with authority but with purpose, authenticity, and heart.

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