



# ORGANIZATION

## LEADERS MANUAL

A handbook for building innovative and engaged teams

○ → SECOND EDITION ← --- X

## Open leadership lessons from a galaxy far, far away

*Jim Hall*

**N**o matter where you are in an organization, you can benefit from observing others and learning from them. We can *all* learn lessons from someone else.

I like to look for leadership lessons wherever I go. Sometimes I learn a few tips on public speaking by watching a skilled presenter. Or I'll learn how to improve my meeting management style by reflecting on meetings that go well.

But I also like to find leadership lessons from unlikely places. Several years ago, I started reflecting on the leadership lessons we can learn from certain television shows or movies. Specifically, I found myself thinking about the role and power of leadership during periods of great transition—following the events in *Return of the Jedi*.

I imagined myself as an outside observer at the film's conclusion. What would I think upon hearing that the Emperor had died during the Battle of Endor? And what advice would I give the next person to assume the mantle of supreme leader?

I began by considering the obvious next leader: Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith. Vader's leadership style is essentially the same as Emperor Palpatine's. Both prefer a top-down leadership approach, and neither are very inclined to make major changes to the way the Galactic Empire is structured or run. To them, what worked for the last twenty years would probably continue to work in the future. The only changes would be "bigger and better," such as building even larger Star Destroyers.

So as Vader presumably transitioned into his new leadership role, what advice would I give him?

Since Vader's leadership style is very similar to that of his predecessor, I would recommend that Vader meet with his management teams and communicate that everyone should "stay the course," and that nothing would change. By doing this, Vader sets an expectation with those below him that everyone can understand. In this first meeting, Vader would likely also set his expectations for the Empire, and identify any areas that might change from his predecessor. I expect that the rest of the Empire would get behind Vader as the new leader and generally support him in his transition.

But in the movie, Vader didn't become the new leader. Spoiler alert to those who haven't seen the film: the Rebellion wins the day. As a result, I think it's safe to assume that, if the film had continued, Princess Leia would have become the new supreme leader (and if you've seen the new sequels, you know that was pretty much the case).

I imagine Leia would also want to take the organization in a new direction. But Leia's leadership style is demonstrably quite different from that of Emperor Palpatine or Darth Vader. Rather than leveraging a top-down directed-leadership approach, Leia typically sets the context for people to do their best and collaborate. You might say that Leia prefers *an open organization model*.

With such a contrasting style, what advice would I offer Leia as she makes her leadership transition?

My advice would be for Leia to embrace the open organization culture. As we've seen in the various Star Wars films, while the organizational structure of the Rebellion was quasi-military, it was also rather *open*. Members shared information freely, and they worked toward a shared, clearly-defined vision—sometimes ignoring typical organizational norms as people from different parts of the organization came together to meet common goals.

Stepping into the leadership role of an open organization, Leia should meet with the senior leaders as early as possible and explain her vision. In this meeting, she would define her goals and work col-

laboratively with that team to establish priorities to drive the first one hundred days. Most importantly, Leia should discuss any broad themes for major changes. By communicating early and often as she takes on the new leadership role, Leia sets and reinforces expectations with those around her. As a result, I expect that her transition would be ultimately successful.

Compare the two leadership transitions: My advice for Darth Vader's top-down transition is to communicate broadly and share goals. Similarly, my leadership advice for Princess Leia's open organization transition is to communicate frequently and set goals. Despite very different leadership styles, my recommendations for effective leadership transition are basically the same; the results, of each approach, however, might be dramatically different.

Apply this leadership lesson to your next transition. No matter where you are in the organization, and no matter your leadership style, your leadership transition remains the same. Communicate with those around you, set goals, and clarify priorities. Identify any planned changes as early as possible in your transition, share updates frequently, and the Force will be with you.

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