

# THE 10 BEST



# LEADERSHIP MOVIES

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# INTRODUCTION

Movies can be one of the greatest sources of inspiration for leaders. It's amazing what you can learn about all aspects of leadership: from individual skills and techniques, to the importance of values and behaviours.

I've spent two years looking at a wide variety of movies from a leadership perspective, and I'm frequently asked for my best leadership movie. So here's my top 10.

Any list of top leadership movies is subjective, and mine is no different. So how have I come up with my choices?

I've tried to select a range of movies that highlight different aspects of leadership. There are movies featuring true life leadership icons (*Invictus*, *Gandhi*, *Thirteen Days*) and unlikely leaders with no formal authority (*The Shawshank Redemption*).

There are movies with leaders placed under extraordinary pressure (*Apollo 13*), and movies depicting leadership of students and sports teams (*Remember the Titans*, *Coach Carter*).

There are movies that role model a key leadership skill in fascinating detail, even a movie where the lead character is a hen!

And in many of the selections, you can see outstanding leaders operating at many different levels.

Of course, it wasn't easy. There have been some hard choices. It was a wrench to leave out leadership classics such as *Lincoln*, *Braveheart*, *Made in Dagenham*, *A Bug's Life*, *The King's Speech*, *Dead Poets Society* and many more. But this is my choice as of today - and no doubt it will change by tomorrow.

I had fun making my selections and I hope you enjoy reading about them.

So what do you think? Good choices or bad? Let me know what your views by emailing [dave@movieleadership.com](mailto:dave@movieleadership.com) or tweet me @dave\_wraith.



*Dave*

# APOLLO 13

## IN A NUTSHELL...

When the Apollo 13 lunar mission becomes paralysed following an explosion on board, the crew and ground teams race against time to discover the extent of the damage and how to save it.

It's down to Gene Kranz's mission control team to overcome unprecedented odds and get the stricken craft back to Earth – with less onboard power than it takes to run a vacuum cleaner...



Possibly the greatest leadership movie of them all, the true story of Apollo 13 also boasts one of the movies' most compelling leaders in the steely, waistcoated Flight Director Gene Kranz, memorably portrayed by Ed Harris.

Here's a leader who won't submit to defeat even when it's staring him in the face – and who won't let his team accept defeat either. That steely attitude instills belief in everyone around him.

Kranz expertly marshals his resources with his instruction to 'work the problem', enabling everyone to play their role in resolving the crisis. For every seemingly impossible situation, his response is simple – we need to find a way to make it work.

That confidence is infectious. 'We've never lost an American in space and we sure as hell ain't gonna lose one on my watch,' he tells his assembled flight team. 'Failure is not an option!'

Kranz is the living embodiment of the Kouzes and Posner leadership practice of 'Enable Others to Act' – focusing them on the task in hand, keeping them calm and making his expectations crystal clear. *Apollo 13* is the co-ordination of a massive team effort to achieve an improbable result, and everyone has their role to play – whether it's the grounded pilot brought into the simulator to find a successful re-entry approach, or the NASA staff given a box of everything in the shuttle and instructed to make a 'square peg fit a round hole'.

Although we know the ending, *Apollo 13* still manages to be a gripping movie. It's also perhaps the ultimate in leadership and crisis management movies, where a brilliantly-led team really do succeed in making the seemingly impossible happen.

## GREAT FOR...

**crisis management, setting expectations, determination,  
enabling others to act, teamwork, creativity**

# COACH CARTER

## IN A NUTSHELL...

Former student Ken Carter returns to his troubled old school, Richmond High, as head coach of their unsuccessful basketball team. But Carter doesn't just want to make them successful: he wants to change their lives and help them get to college.

Carter's team deliver success on the basketball court, winning the regional championships. But when he discovers that a number of his team have been skipping classes or failing to achieve the required academic standards, Carter imposes a 'lock-out' to prevent them playing until their grades improve.



*Coach Carter* may not have been a great commercial hit but it's stuffed to the rafters with great leadership behaviour that can be transposed to almost any sphere of leadership. And like *Remember the Titans*, its high school sport setting has the power to inspire young people in particular.

What marks Carter's leadership is his real desire to make a difference, and his confidence that he can. Most of the team - and even their parents - have low expectations for their lives. In fact, Carter is slated by some parents for encouraging them to aspire to go to college. But Carter truly believes his students can aim higher, and inspires them to do the same.

Right from the start, he sets clear expectations from his students, handing each a contract stating that in return for playing, students must attend their classes and achieve basic academic standards. If they don't sign, they don't play.

Crucially, when his team fail to meet their part of the deal, Carter stays true to his ideals. Although his team are now winning, Carter stops them playing until every student's grades meet the minimum standard. And not just the ones who are failing: Carter instils a team ethic by stopping them all playing, academic achiever or not.

His decision meets resistance from every angle: his team, parents, teachers and the School Board. But his willingness to risk his job to make a better future for his students ultimately wins them over, and they take responsibility for helping each other improve their academic scores.

*Coach Carter* is a highly entertaining and inspiring story of having a vision of change and seeing it through in spite of determined resistance.

**GREAT FOR... vision, setting clear expectations, team ethic, overcoming resistance, influencing**

# THIRTEEN DAYS

## IN A NUTSHELL

It's the start of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. American spy planes have spotted the build-up of medium range Russian nuclear missiles in Cuba.

It's up to the young and inexperienced President John F Kennedy, along with his brother Bobby and trusted Special Adviser Kenny O'Donnell, to chart a safe conclusion to the crisis and resist the gung-ho advice of his military advisers that will surely plunge the world into armageddon.



It's hard to imagine that, just 50 years ago, the world was a mere hair's breadth away from self destruction. It's a story compellingly told in *Thirteen Days*, a classic tale of crisis management and leading under pressure, and one awash with leadership lessons.

With Russian missiles in Cuba presenting an immediate threat to national security, Kennedy is under pressure from his military advisers to take decisive and potentially inflammatory action. 'The big red dog is digging in your lawn!' they point out. But he refuses to be bullied into making decisions, even though he knows his reluctance may be perceived as weakness.

Instead, he creates his own 'guiding team' – brother Bobby and special adviser Kenny O'Donnell – who share his ideals and philosophy and who he can rely on completely.

He then pushes them to explore all the options, even when his military advisers are telling him that none exist. As Thomas Edison once said, 'When you think you've exhausted all possibilities, remember this: you haven't.' In one scene, Bobby Kennedy bangs the table of the Security Council meeting, refusing to accept that an air strike on Cuba is the only possible action – and eventually elicits a grudging concession that a naval blockade may also be a possibility.

*Thirteen Days* is a great model of leadership under the most intense pressure. While most of us will – thankfully – never have to face our own Cuban missile crisis, the lessons are just as relevant for the many daily crises in our own lives.

**GREAT FOR...** crisis management, mental strength, exploring all options, creating a guiding team.



# INVICTUS

## IN A NUTSHELL

Following his release from prison and election as the new President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela spots the potential of the Rugby World Cup as a way of uniting his divided country.

Enlisting the support of Springbok rugby team captain Francois Pienaar, they succeed in turning round not only the team's fortunes, but those of the entire country.



One of Kouzes and Posner's five practices of exemplary leadership is Model the Way – and I can think of no greater exponent than Nelson Mandela. In *Invictus*, the examples come thick and fast.

Mandela, of course, is one of history's most iconic leaders. What sets him apart is his ability to forgive. To endure extraordinary personal suffering, and then to shake hands with his tormentors and move on for the greater good.

He is unfailing in his commitment to reconciliation as a way of uniting his vastly divided country, and knows that the standard he sets for his people is crucial. Mandela is the perfect example of a leader 'walking the talk' – whether by changing the ethnic make-up of his personal bodyguards, or by intervening to ensure that the white minority is not 'punished' for the past by changes to what they treasure most: Springbok rugby.

But *Invictus* is not all about Mandela – there are leadership struggles taking place on a number of different levels. There's Francois Pienaar, captain of the underperforming Springboks, who buys into Mandela's vision but quickly realises leadership can be uncomfortable as he encounters opposition from his own team. And there's Mandela's chief bodyguard, Jason Tshabalala, who's compelled to work with – and trust – the Special Branch operatives who were once enemies.

Led by Mandela's example, they all model the way – demonstrating the behaviours that will be critical to the rebuilding of their nation.

**GREAT FOR...** vision, modelling the way, overcoming resistance, inspiration, trust, diversity, influencing

# THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

## IN A NUTSHELL

Wrongly-convicted banker Andy Dufresne rises above the desperate circumstances of his imprisonment in Shawshank Prison by playing the long game and never losing hope.

In the process, he changes the lives of his fellow inmates, none more so than worn-down lifer Ellis 'Red' Redding.



If you define leadership as the ability to have a positive impact on those around you, then *The Shawshank Redemption* scores highly.

Its hero, Andy Dufresne, is an everyman plunged into extraordinary circumstances. But, fuelled by an unbridled sense of hope, he chooses to act in an extraordinary way. As a result, he has a transforming effect on his fellow inmates - none more so than best friend 'Red'.

Andy, of course, has no formal leadership role, but his belief in the power of hope drives him to carry out numerous unselfish acts of kindness to lift the mood of his fellow inmates.

Early on, he risks retribution from the sadistic Captain Hadley in order to secure beers for his fellow workers on the factory roof they're resurfacing. He then works tirelessly to re-stock and renovate the prison library, and tutors a fellow inmate to help him get his high school diploma.

In one of its most famous scenes, Andy locks up a guard in order to give his fellow inmates just a few moments of uplifting opera played over the prison tannoy. It's Andy's belief in the power of small acts to encourage hope which makes him a most unselfish leader – one who will put his own comfort at risk in order to inspire others.

With best friend Red, Andy inspires a shared vision - of a peaceful life where they can both truly escape the bonds of the physical and mental prison that surround them. Red feels he is 'institutionalised': incapable of adapting to life outside the walls of the institution he has known for so long. But through Andy's encouragement and belief, Red is ultimately able to make the final leap and break free to a new life.

*The Shawshank Redemption* has consistently topped the Internet Movie Database's Top 250 list of movies voted by users. It's a powerful story of leadership with a simple premise: anything is possible if you never give up hope.

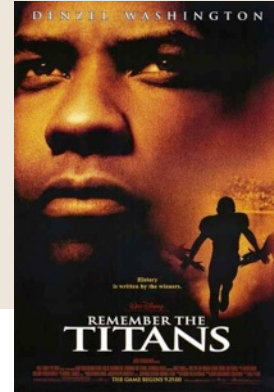
**GREAT FOR... vision, encouraging the heart, positive thinking, courage**



# REMEMBER THE TITANS

## IN A NUTSHELL

Virginia, 1971. African-American football coach Herman Boone is appointed by TC Williams High School for their first season as a racially integrated establishment. With tensions high, the team helps unify the community as both coaches and boys gradually learn to trust and depend on each other.



Unsurprisingly, *Remember the Titans* seems to strike a chord with many teenagers and young adults studying leadership. It's a multi-layered feast of learning points which pop off the screen with dependable frequency.

The leadership challenges in *Remember the Titans* all feel very contemporary - whether it's Boone's struggle to unite his team and get his fellow coach Bill Yoast on board, or Yoast's own struggle to come to terms with the disappointment of not being appointed coach. Or team captain Gary Bertir's painful lesson from fellow player Julius that 'attitude reflects leadership', and that any change is going to have to start with him.

Of all the movies in this book, *Remember the Titans* is the best for demonstrating how to lead through change. Boone may not have been reading John Kotter's famous eight steps for leading change, but you can still find them all here.

At training camp, Boone outlines a clear vision for the team: they will be perfect in everything they do. He creates a vivid sense of urgency with a memorable early morning run to the Gettysburg Memorial. 'If we don't come together on this hallowed ground right now,' he declares, 'we too will be destroyed.'

He builds on the 'bright spots', shining a spotlight on the unprejudiced Louie Lastik to show the culture he wants. He ensures players sit on the bus and share a room with team mates of a different colour and, when his players still don't mix, he introduces three training sessions a day until they do.

As Boone's methods begin to work, others take responsibility for making the change work too, even at personal cost. Coach Yoast ditches his loyal but prejudiced assistant, while Gary cuts his best friend Ray from the team.

Above all, *Remember the Titans* shows that change is never smooth. Obstacles arise at every turn; loyalties and prejudices are challenged. To make change work, you need to work through every obstacle and keep up the momentum.

**GREAT FOR...** change leadership, diversity, modelling the way, vision, trust, humility

# CHICKEN RUN

## IN A NUTSHELL

Plucky chicken Ginger is determined to lead her comrades in a mass breakout from Tweedy's Farm before they all become chicken pies. Though her attempts seem doomed to failure, their luck appears to change for the better when a cocky rooster, Rocky, seeks refuge on the farm.



Finding the best animated leadership movie for my 10 became a two-horse race between *A Bug's Life* and *Chicken Run*. But in the end, the chickens won out - not least because of the powerful leadership qualities of its star, Ginger.

Ginger is a hen with vision. While her fellow inmates seem resigned to their lot, Ginger paints a picture of a brighter future for them all – one they can all buy into. 'There's a better place out there, somewhere beyond that hill,' she tells them.

Confident that her vision is worth fighting for, Ginger is single-minded in her efforts to make it happen, and remains steadfast in the face of resistance from her escape-weary colleagues.

She sees every failed escape attempt as a learning opportunity: one more technique they know doesn't work. The opening montage shows her repeated attempt escapes consistently punished, but nothing will stop her determination to succeed. Each failure brings her one step closer to succeeding.

Ginger is also a skilful organiser of resources. She appoints a lead with the right skills for each task (design, manufacturing) and recruits the scavenging rats Nick and Fetcher to acquire the other materials she needs.

Having allocated responsibility for each area, Ginger manages by walking the job. She continually encourages and recognises her team's efforts, while cajoling them to higher levels of output as their deadline approaches. And when, at the last minute, ex-Air Force bird Fowler refuses to pilot their 'crate', Ginger quickly brings him round. 'You're always talking about back in your day,' she tells him. 'Well, today is your day.' She hands him his Air Force badge – and Fowler is back on board.

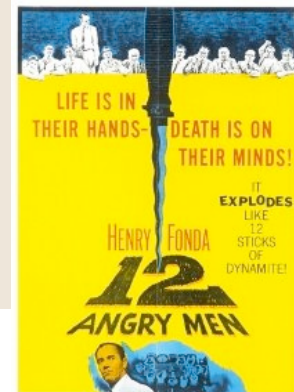
Humorous it may be, but *Chicken Run* shows the power of a leader who can see the possibilities that lie beyond their current fences, and can inspire people to follow them to that new ground.

**GREAT FOR... vision, learning from failure, persistence, modelling the way, influencing, organisation, decisiveness**

# 12 ANGRY MEN

## IN A NUTSHELL

On a hot summer's day, 12 jurors retire to consider their verdict on a seemingly open and shut murder case. Only one, juror 8, has doubts. Though uncertain of the defendant's guilt or innocence, his insistence on re-examining the case gradually leads the remaining 11 jurors to change their minds.



Influencing skills are near the top of most leaders' skill requirements. In *12 Angry Men* you'll find a masterclass. It's also a classic illustration of the Kouzes and Posner leadership behaviour *Challenge the Process*.

One of the hardest aspects of leadership is having the courage to take a stand, especially if your team or peers are all against you. It can be a lonely place to be. But just because you're the lone voice, it doesn't mean you're wrong.

In *12 Angry Men*, juror 8, played by Henry Fonda, makes himself instantly unpopular by refusing to sanction a unanimous 'guilty' verdict without re-examining the case in more detail. It's a great leadership lesson in itself. Juror 8 is unsure of the man's guilt or innocence. But with so much at stake, he simply wants to challenge his colleagues on whether they've really considered the issue in sufficient detail. Fortunately, he's able to enlist a number of powerful influencing techniques to support him.

He asks challenging questions. He identifies flaws in the prosecution's case and in the commitment of the defence team, but lets his fellow jurors come to their own conclusions about their meaning.

He builds alliances, starting with his one initial supporter, the elderly juror.

He uses drama and imagery: on one occasion, dramatically throwing a duplicate knife on the table to prove the ubiquity of the apparently 'unique' murder weapon.

He uses others' expertise to lend authenticity to the argument: the elderly juror who can understand the motivations of a key witness; the man who lived near the elevated subway; the juror who'd witnessed knife fights.

He's also able to expose his colleagues' hidden motivations, revealing them both to themselves and to each other.

*12 Angry Men* is a compelling example of the power of influence, and of taking a stand for what you believe in.

**GREAT FOR...** influencing, courage, change management, ethics, challenging preconceptions

# MONEYBALL

## IN A NUTSHELL

Unable to compete with his wealthy rivals, Oakland Athletics General Manager Billy Beane shakes up the professional baseball establishment by adopting statistical analysis as the basis for player recruitment and selection. Exposing himself and his team to ridicule, Beane puts everything at risk... and achieves something unprecedented in baseball history.



Many organisations with a strong sense of tradition and history find it difficult to innovate and adapt to changing times. It takes strong leadership to challenge the status quo.

In *Moneyball*, Billy Beane shakes up one such establishment: professional baseball. It's an entertaining and effective lesson in the power of challenging the process, thinking outside the box, and the importance of measurement.

With three star players leaving for better contracts, there's no money to recruit similarly talented replacements. He has the vision to see that his team need a different approach.

He spots an approach in the methods of reticent economist Peter Brand that he thinks might work, and he's quick to run with it. Brand's statistical analysis values players almost entirely on one key metric - the number of times they get to first base. It's a great example of a strengths-based approach. The focus is all on what their recruits can do, and not what they can't. Beane and his coaching team work around their weaknesses rather than let them become an issue.

This novel approach attracts opposition from Beane's own coaches and scouts, along with most of the baseball establishment. When the team starts badly, he realises he hasn't committed himself 100% to his own approach, and his hands-off approach to leading hasn't helped others buy into it either.

He changes that by neutralising his manager's blocking tactics, selling a disruptive player and dealing with some of the team's minor niggles – like having to pay for soda from the vending machine.

Most importantly, he gets closer to his players – explaining the approach, getting buy in and building team spirit. He also clears the air with his most experienced player and encourages him to act more as a leader.

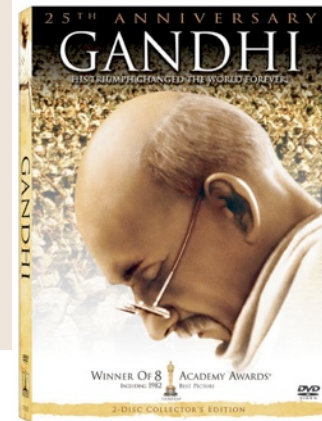
The results are stunning, as the team embarks on an unprecedented winning streak, winning 20 games in a row – an American League record.

**GREAT FOR...** challenge the process, innovation, measurement, strengths-based leadership, change management

# GANDHI

## IN A NUTSHELL

From inauspicious beginnings as a lawyer in South Africa in the late 1800s, Mohandas K Gandhi's commitment to challenging injustice, and his doctrine of non-violent resistance, see him gain extraordinary influence with his native people. Within 50 years, he leads his country to independence and transforms the notion of leadership.



Of all great leaders through history, there can be few to match the legendary Mohandas K Gandhi, the Indian spiritual leader and subject of Richard Attenborough's astonishing 1982 film.

This is a man who, within a few short decades, leads his country to freedom from British rule. A man who achieves it largely without violence or loss of life. And a man whose method of achieving it would have almost all of us scratching our heads with disbelief.

It's Gandhi's commitment to non-violent resistance - and his ability to rally followers in great numbers around that doctrine - that sets him apart from almost anyone else in history.

In appearance, Gandhi seems the very antithesis of a leader. In the beginning, he hardly has India's British rulers quaking in their boots. But they soon change their tune when his humility, selflessness and open acts of non-compliance start attracting followers in their thousands.

Gandhi's secret is that he truly understands his people, and lives as one of them. He starts as a relatively wealthy lawyer, but eschews all the trappings of wealth and power to live the simple life of his followers. In stark contrast to his fellow lawyers in the Indian Congress Party, he travels the country to find 'the real India', dressing simply and spinning his own cloth.

Whether it's the minority Muslims or the 'untouchables' of Indian society, he treats everyone as equals.

People follow him because they realise that here is someone who understands their needs, has their best interests at heart, and will fight for their welfare.

It's the kind of following that turns out in whole villages to support his 240 mile salt march. A following that ceases widespread rioting in response to his fast for peace. And that willingly queues up, one by one, to be viciously clubbed as a gesture of non-violent defiance.

**GREAT FOR...** vision, modelling the way, courage, determination, sacrifice, unselfishness

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# 50 MOVIE SCENES WHICH HIGHLIGHT GREAT LEADERSHIP



Movies are great for role modelling leadership behaviour, generating discussion and creating interest.

But it's often impractical to use full-length movies in a learning context. Short, self-contained scenes which demonstrate leadership behaviour are far more practical.

[50 movie scenes which highlight great leadership](#) is a 48-page eBook resource identifying 50 short scenes from well-known movies which model great leadership behaviour. Each scene illustrates one of Kouzes and Posner's five leadership practices from [The Leadership Challenge](#).

- Quickly find specific scenes to illustrate your point
- Invest only in the movies you need
- Add a more engaging dimension to leadership training, presentations or events

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