

Leadership lessons from 12 Angry Men



If I have watched the film “12 Angry Men” once, I have watched it a hundred times; I use it regularly in my leadership seminars, getting participants to watch it before or between modules and then debriefing it collectively.

The film is a leadership seminar in itself.

Here are my 12 Leadership Lessons – 12 amongst numerous

Lesson 1 is “standing up and being counted”, quite possibly the essence of leadership.

In the film, eleven people have voted “not guilty” and it just needs one more vote for the defendant to be condemned to the death penalty; however, the one more vote doesn’t come. When asked, by the jury chairman, “and who votes not guilty”, juror n°8 unhesitatingly raises his hand – unlike some of those who had voted guilty.

Going against the current is never easy, everyone is convinced of the idea or decision, and you are not sure; what do you do? Do you “go with the flow” or do you put your hand up and be counted?

You think you are doing something “noble” in standing up for what you think is right and, almost immediately, people start to “shoot you down”.

Making a stand for something you believe in is a real hallmark

of leadership; Lincoln, MLK, Gandhi, Jaures and many others all stood up for what they believed in, and they were all shot down.

Standing up and being counted doesn't necessarily mean getting assassinated, but it will undoubtedly get you a lot of diatribe and people digging into the smallest "mistakes" you committed in the past.

You do not have to be a saint to incarnate your leadership, but you do need to be prepared to suffer the "slings and arrows" when "taking arms against a sea of troubles"

Lesson 2 is "Be prepared" this is quite possibly a precursor of the previous lesson "Stand up and be counted"; it's the being prepared that, maybe, stops you getting shot down.

This scene with the knife is an excellent example, not only of being prepared, but also of the use of "Kairos" (the right or opportune moment)

Juror n°8 asks for the knife to be brought in, fully knowing that he has exactly the same knife in his pocket. He lets juror n°4 open and manipulate the knife but says nothing about the knife in his pocket.

He simply questions the possibility of the existence of a second knife and lets the tension build up to the point where juror n°3 (the "nemesis" of juror n°8) becomes excited; it's at this moment that he stands up (having been seated up till now) and produces the second knife.

Of course, he could have shown the second knife earlier and it would undoubtedly have had an impact; however, by waiting and changing his body position, he creates not only an intellectual impact but also an emotional impact – and we all know that an emotional impact creates a longer lasting memory than an intellectual impact

Lesson 3 is “Take Risks” another leadership hallmark; taking risks shouldn’t be confused with being reckless.

Juror n°8 proposes a second vote, but this time a “secret vote”, as opposed to the first, “hands-in-the air” vote

If we go back to the first scene and analyse the first vote, it is clear that there were people “unsure” how to vote and simply followed the crowd – the risk taken by juror n°8 to have a second vote is a calculated risk, “if one person changes their mind, we continue, if all eleven of you vote guilty, I’ll vote guilty”

Being aware of what is going on around you, is essential if you want to influence others; you need to be aware of your “supporters”, your “enemies” and your “floating voters”. Jurors 3, 4, 7 and 10 are clearly not going to change their minds and their vote easily, whereas jurors 2, 5, 9 and 11 seem more ready to be influenced.

You need to decide when and with who, to use your energy – don’t waste it on your enemies until you have built up some support.

Lesson 4 is “the importance of the first follower”, a “tipping point” when influencing others.

Up to this point, juror n°8 had been on his own; not everyone was attacking him or criticism his position, but no one was actively supporting him.

Being the first follower is not easy, you can be seen as a traitor and as letting the others down; it is also not easy to admit that maybe you were wrong or that you have been convinced by someone else’s arguments.

Having a first follower (or followers) helps you to keep going; others believe in what you are saying or doing and are willing to side with you – you are no longer the only black

sheep!

Another excellent example of the impact of the first follower is the “Dancing Man” video which can be found on YouTube. A guy on his own is dancing at a rock festival, after about a minute he is joined by a second person, then a third and then everyone is up.

The first follower shows to everyone, including yourself, that you are “not alone”.

Lesson 5 is “systems thinking”. The scene based around the discussion of the metro train passing in front of the window is an excellent example of this,

Juror n°8 fights hard to stay focused while juggling with multiple pieces of information; the speed of the train, the woman in the opposite apartment, the cry of the boy, the body hitting the floor

Leadership is not about having plenty of answers, but it is about having plenty of questions and pulling together different, and often opposing, pieces of information to come to a holistic answer.

It is often easier to see a problem as a linear series of events; this however, leads to peripheral blindness.

He involves others by asking them questions, “have you ever lived near a train line?”, “do you think he could have heard the boy?”

It’s by looking at an issue collectively and from different angles that robust solutions can be found.

Lesson 6 is “The Ladder of Inference” (a model created by Chris Argyris), the old man’s apartment scene is a very good example of the model in use.

Everyone, except of course juror n°8, has accepted that the

old man in the appartement below was able to get out of bed, walk to the door of his appartement and see the young boy within 15 seconds.

Eleven jurors have “concluded” that it is possible. After some discussion, juror n°8 asks to see a plan of the apartment and slowly digs down through, assumptions, beliefs and interpretations to finally “reenact” the event complete with a mock bed, a limp, a door to be opened and someone with a stopwatch – 45 seconds!

The reality, not assumptions, beliefs or interpretations, is that it would probably have taken the old man around 40 seconds to get out of bed, walk to the door of his appartement and see the young boy – not 15 seconds.

We all have own ladder and, even if it starts at the same point as everyone else’s, because of different experiences we will not all end up at the same end point

Sometimes we need to persuade everyone to take the journey “up the ladder”, together

Lesson 7 is about “self-doubts”. The washroom scene is somewhat different from the others, juror n°8 is not “in the thick of the action”.

First, he interreacts with juror n°7 and then juror n°6 comes in and after a short exchange, says to juror n°8, “and what if you are wrong; what if you convince all of us that the boy is not guilty – and in fact he is”

The look of self-doubt is important in terms of leadership; if we become too rigid or too fixed in our thoughts and ideas, we can block out other possibilities.

As he said himself early in the film, “I don’t know if he is guilty, but I have some doubts”

My interpretation of his behaviour throughout the film is not

that he wants to convince the others that the boy is not guilty, but rather to get them to realise that they also have doubts – and he does this by expressing his doubts.

Lesson 8 is “leadership is about we” and puts the spotlight on another juror; it is not only juror n°8 that shows leadership during the film.

Juror n°11 is one of the quieter members of the jury and not prone to emotional outbursts; however, he makes a plea for “collectiveness” in the decision-making process finishing his short speech with, “this is one of the reasons we are strong, we should not make this a personal thing”

The lesson, “leadership is about we”, is at the heart of collective decisions.

It should not be individuals simply “defending” their point of view, often with diatribe as their only arguments; it shouldn't be a debate with winners and losers and it shouldn't be a discussion with agreements to differ.

Leadership is about we and the only communication process that leads to we, is dialogue.

As Jim Kouzes said, “Leadership is about relationships, and strong relationships are built on mutual understanding. You can get to that mutual understanding only through conversation and dialogue”

Lesson 9 is “the importance of adapting your style”.

I will focus on juror's n°3 and 4, but there are many other examples of how juror n°8 adapts his posture, his words and how he say's things to the other jury members.

Juror n°3 is a kind of emotional volcano waiting to explode, whereas juror n°4 is (at least seems) much calmer and rational.

The dominant style of Juror n°8 is not dissimilar (although slightly more emotional) to that of juror n°4; he only loses his temper once, early on in the film, when others start playing “noughts & crosses”. He remains generally calm and factual, always present without being omnipresent.

He “deliberately” and “consciously” uses his emotions to goad juror n°3 into saying “I’ll kill you”, and then simply asks, “did you mean that”.

He, again, deliberately, uses his patience and, this time, factual questioning to push juror n°4 to the point where, for the first time, he starts to sweat and lose his apparent calm.

He uses two different approaches, with two very different people, to achieve the same result; to show to both that maybe there is a crack in their arguments.

Lesson 10 is “Beware of prejudices”, this comes from the tirade by juror n°10, a stalwart of the “guilty camp”.

This is a very powerful scene, where even those “on the same side” as juror n°10 slowly take their distance by either moving away or turning their backs.

After his tirade, juror n°8 is the first to speak; he could easily have criticised juror n°10 for being bigoted, instead he simply says, “It’s very hard to keep personal prejudice out of a thing like this, and no matter where you run into it, prejudice obscures the truth”

I would reformulate the last part of the quote to say, “prejudice obscures doubt”; there is often no “one truth” and prejudices often stop as seeing alternatives or possibilities that, when combined, could lead to a collective truth.

Lesson 11 is, quite possibly my favourite scene, is the from the final scene in the jury room, when juror n°8 hands his “nemesis” his coat.

This scene sums up, at least for me, what leadership is all about; it's not about criticising people, it's not about attacking people and it's not about belittling people. Leadership is about disagreeing with people's ideas, arguments and points of view – it's not personal.

This scene also sums up quite nicely the behaviour of juror n°8 through the film, “determined and empathic”, he allows himself to be attacked, ridiculed and criticised but does not attack or criticise the others.

Too often, today, leaders seem to engage in diatribe when what is needed is dialogue.

Lesson 12 is not a particular scene but something that is shown throughout the film, “The power of questions”

Socrates only had questions in his “toolbox” and he made a great reputation for himself by using the judiciously.

Questions are one of the hallmarks of leadership; questions open up avenues to be explored. Some may lead to dead ends; some may lead to one-way streets and some may lead to new horizons.

It's these new horizons that allow groups to get beyond “groupthink” and, finally, make robust and truly consensual decisions.

Leadership quite possibly more about having all the questions, rather than having all the answers.