



# *Lesson 1: Leveraging Leadership in Everyday Life* LTC John VanDusen, 2021. Road to Awesome

## BOOK REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

This review critically examines *Lesson 1: Leveraging Leadership in Everyday Life* by LTC John VanDusen (Road to Awesome, LLC, 2021, 162 pages). The review explores the book's strengths, such as its practical approach and real-world scenarios, and its limitations, including a strong military focus. The review also discusses the book's pedagogical value, recommending it as a supplementary resource in leadership education. This analysis aims to guide educators and students in utilizing the book effectively within leadership studies.

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Teaching leadership is a challenge in both formal (e.g., undergraduate courses) and informal settings (e.g., company mentorship programs). Part of the challenge is a lack of clarity of what leadership is as an overarching construct, with many theories and perspectives vying for attention in academic literature (Gardner et al., 2020), including those informed by the field of veterans studies (Dexter, 2020; Harper, 2022). The practical side of leadership is no better; a simple search for books on “leadership” returns over 60,000 results. Indeed, there is no shortage of theoretical frameworks and anecdotal evidence on how to be a good leader, an area where veterans studies offers real-world insights and scholarly perspectives that ground leadership concepts in the practical, lived experiences of military veterans (Kirchner & Akdere, 2019). As educators, we often grapple with questions like: What does it mean to be an effective leader? To what extent can leadership be taught versus manifest through personality, behaviors, and other intuitive characteristics? And, importantly, how do we bridge the gap between theory and practice?

Insights within veterans studies, specifically a focus on the translation and real-world application of knowledge gained through military experiences, offer a unique opportunity to address many of these questions. These insights enrich broader leadership education and, reciprocally, allow leadership education to provide valuable perspectives to veterans studies. This symbiotic relationship fosters a deeper understanding and application of leadership principles in diverse contexts, drawing significantly from the rich tapestry of veterans’ experiences.

To equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for leadership in diverse contexts, in formal academic settings, we often turn to academic journals, textbooks, and practitioner-focused publications (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*). I use *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner (hereafter referred to as K&P; 2023), which outlines a powerful framework of leadership practices. I also challenge students to utilize a critical examination of the leadership industry by reading *Leadership BS* by Pfeffer (2015), prompting us to question and reevaluate conventional wisdom. While K&P offers a blueprint, and Pfeffer offers a critical perspective on leadership myths and practices, what is missing is a practical bridge that vividly illustrates how these theories can be applied in everyday life.

*Lesson 1: Leveraging Leadership in Everyday Life* by LTC John VanDusen (2021) provides this bridge. VanDusen presents the book through the lens of practicality, presenting a collection of real-world scenarios and tangible examples from his military, coaching, and teaching experiences. He vividly illustrates how leadership theories are applied in everyday life, demonstrating how theories come alive.

Further, VanDusen’s book provides a hands-on guide for anyone seeking to develop their leadership skills in a veteran’s own voice, an essential element that enriches the leadership lessons presented in the book. The author doesn’t just tell you what leadership should look like, he shows you what it can look like through compelling stories and practical insights. In doing so, the book serves as a valuable companion, not only to the academic rigors of books like K&P’s (2023) and the skeptical criticisms of Pfeffer (2015), but also as a tool for students to navigate the intricacies of leadership in their own lives, drawing on the lived experiences of a military veteran.

Simultaneously, VanDusen compares military experiences with civilian ones, bridging the often divided contexts, and providing tangible insights to a challenge faced by military veterans (i.e., translating their leadership skills to civilian contexts).

## STRENGTHS

Upon first opening the book, readers are struck by the unconventional approach to chapter organization where each chapter is intentionally labeled as “Lesson 1.” This suggests that each topic is not sequential but equally foundational to the understanding of leadership. VanDusen emphasizes the idea that each lesson is a crucial starting point, a “Lesson 1” in its own right (p. 21), reinforcing the practical approach to leadership. Each principle is a cornerstone in the broader architecture of effective leadership practices, including a variety of leadership skills from building trust to rehearsals.

Many of the lessons, while derived from military-style leadership, resonate with established academic leadership theories. Servant leadership theory, developed by Greenleaf (1998) and emphasizing the leader’s prioritization of the needs of followers, are evident in VanDusen’s ability to tie his success as a teacher to the success of his students (p. 46). Similarly, VanDusen’s lessons on interpersonal skills and self-awareness in the classroom mirror Goleman’s (1998) concept of emotional intelligence in leadership. VanDusen demonstrates this when he tailors questions about side conversations as extensions of classroom thinking rather than distractors (p. 84). Further, his recognition of the emotional impact of using the proverbial “hammer vs carrot” shows how emotional intelligence is critical in leadership, particularly in understanding and managing emotions in oneself and others. These real-world scenarios offer tangible illustrations of how emotional intelligence plays out in various leadership contexts.

Additionally, organizational behavior theories outside of specific leadership are also present throughout the

book. The chapter subtitled “Tell your subordinates how they are doing” (pp. 111–114) mirrors the importance of feedback within job characteristics theory; “Be yourself (pp. 115–118)” reflects authentic leadership theory; and “A handshake is worth a thousand emails (pp. 99–104)” aligns with the psychological contract’s emphasis on quality of relationships.

While practitioner books often offer context-specific guidance, VanDusen manages to mostly provide broadly applicable advice, steering clear of the pitfalls of overly prescriptive recommendations while still illustrating the art and science in his lived experiences. This balance of showing and telling adds to the utility of the book across diverse leadership scenarios. Additionally, it offers a perspective on how military veterans can further bridge their leadership skills into civilian contexts, an important contribution to veterans studies as a whole.

The second thing many will realize are that the titles of the chapters are not in title format but are instead a directive or piece of advice, such as those offered above and “Ask the stupid question” (p. 37). This informality gives the book a conversational tone that makes it hard to put down; it is almost like the reader is having a discussion with VanDusen himself. This is further emphasized by VanDusen’s use of personal anecdotes. He discusses profoundly moving accounts about his father, a US Navy submariner who was often at sea for “months at a time” (p. 10), his late mother who passed away in the loving presence of the family (p.11), and the loss of seven soldiers and his platoon sergeant while deployed to Iraq (p. 12). These narratives provide a sense of intimacy and resonance.

One of the book’s strongest attributes is its accessibility, with stories that serve as vivid illustrations of leadership principles without overwhelming the reader with excessive detail. VanDusen skillfully outlines the purpose of each lesson and key points, offering methods for assessment through observation and reflection. He also provides strategies on how to integrate these lessons into a regular leadership routine, helping readers to understand not just the what, but also the how of applying these insights in practical settings.

## LIMITATIONS

*Lesson 1* is not without faults. The book’s reliance on military scenarios for its leadership lessons can be a double-edged sword. VanDusen’s use of military contexts provides structured examples of leadership, especially within the context of veterans studies, but this focus may not appeal to all readers (Horn, 2014). VanDusen attempts

to mitigate this by explaining military terms and applying them to more relatable fields like coaching and teaching. Yet, for those not inclined towards military-style leadership, this approach could still be somewhat alienating. This is especially important for nonveterans in veterans studies, as the broader applicability to civilian settings is crucial for developing a deeper, universal understanding of leadership across contexts.

Another area where the book could be seen as lacking is in its treatment of the follower’s role in leadership dyads. VanDusen’s focus is primarily on the leader’s perspective, which means he doesn’t delve deeply into the equally important role of followers according to Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. LMX emphasizes the importance of *mutual* respect, trust, and obligation between leaders and followers, suggesting that effective leadership involves a two-way relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, the book may not fully explore the entire range of leadership dynamics, potentially limiting its effectiveness as a comprehensive and contemporary overview of leadership theories. As noted above, I often use VanDusen’s book as a complementary resource to more theoretical texts.

## LESSON 1 AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

The pedagogical value of *Lesson 1* derives from the practical approach, using real-life scenarios, which bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, making it an essential resource for both veteran and nonveteran students alike. The book’s conversational tone, through directive chapter titles and personal anecdotes, makes it highly engaging and relatable, and the anecdotes related to leadership experiences from military, coaching, and teaching contexts serve as practical illustrations of leadership concepts that will enhance students’ understanding and application of these theories. Additionally, it delicately balances relatable scenarios that may resonate with veterans, with thorough explanations to remain accessible and engaging to nonveteran students.

Educators should use *Lesson 1* as a complementary tool to provide real-world examples and context to the theoretical frameworks discussed in more traditional leadership textbooks. Specifically, within veterans studies, educators should leverage *Lesson 1* to facilitate discussions on the transition and skills translation from military to civilian leadership roles, using VanDusen’s experiences to explore the unique challenges and opportunities within each. For business fields, the book can serve as a case study on the applicability of military leadership behaviors and styles in business contexts, enriching students’ understanding of leadership across different sectors. Finally, in fields like psychology and sociology, *Lesson 1*

provides a lens to explore the psychological drivers and impacts of leadership, social dynamics in leadership, and the influence of leadership on group behavior and culture.

## CONCLUSION

*Lesson 1* is a valuable asset for leadership education in courses within both veterans studies and broader academic and professional settings. Its strength lies in bringing leadership theories to life through tangible examples, making it an excellent resource for students to understand the practical aspects of leadership. While it should be supplemented with more comprehensive theoretical texts, its unique approach makes it an indispensable resource for those seeking to develop a holistic and practical understanding of leadership. Its real-life scenarios, engaging storytelling, and practical insights make it an ideal supplement to academic theories, offering students a valuable perspective on the application of leadership skills in various contexts.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

As a colleague of LTC John VanDusen in the US Army Reserves, where we both serve as adjunct instructors for the Command and General Staff College, I acknowledge a professional connection with the author of *Lesson 1: Leveraging Leadership in Everyday Life*. However, I affirm that this book review has been written independently, without collaboration or solicitation from LTC VanDusen. The review reflects my unbiased perspective and adherence to ethical standards and is penned in my capacity as a civilian professor in management, separate from my military role.

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