



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03X2N
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
SEPTEMBER 27, 2017

ARTICLE **LEADERSHIP**

Bruce Springsteen,
Artful Leadership, and
What Rock Star Bosses
Do

by Gianpiero Petriglieri

LEADERSHIP

Bruce Springsteen, Artful Leadership, and What Rock Star Bosses Do

by Gianpiero Petriglieri

SEPTEMBER 27, 2017 UPDATED SEPTEMBER 29, 2017



There is a special kind of boss. The one who fills up every room with their big ego and even bigger heart. Who voices the hard truths without making you lose hope, and makes you work harder and feel lighter for it. We often call such bosses “rock stars,” to underscore their popular appeal. Some companies have a few of them; others, a handful. Among actual rock stars, however, there has long been only one Boss — Bruce Springsteen — and he is headed to Broadway this fall.

Springsteen’s latest production, an intimate solo show, will combine readings from his recent autobiography, *Born to Run*, with a selection of songs. If it is anything like the book, the show will be a masterclass on management and leadership — only more lyrical than those featuring celebrity entrepreneurs, politicians, or generals.

Artists are managers and leaders, too. It takes good management to keep a band together and an act on the road. But their leadership is different from — and often at odds with — the leadership found at the top of corporations, countries, or armies. The *work* of art, as Springsteen puts it, is “natural subversion.” It is through art that the unspeakable and the unheard find a voice. Establishment leaders might praise and pay for art, but they cannot control it. That is why the artist’s leadership is usually trustworthy: It either speaks to and for people, or it has no power at all.

Springsteen, whose staying power has rested on chronicling what he calls “America’s post-industrial trauma,” is a prime example. Long before economists documented the American dream’s demise, his lyrics mourned it. “Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true, or is it something worse?” he has sung in “The River” for decades. And yet, while singing many disillusioned lines, he has kept that very dream alive. His career is as much a symbol of it as the heroes in his songs. In his life’s work, and the book is no exception, people lose homes, jobs, loves — but never lust and pride.

No wonder the autobiography is a textbook on a virtue that the best managers have and the best leaders spread: resilient hope. The kind of hope borne of staring at the truth — especially the truth of loss and fear — without losing faith. A hope that takes you through hardship, not away from it. I took away three lessons on cultivating it.

To Hold People’s Attention, Serve Their Imagination

In terms of management, Springsteen is an old-school boss, all tough love and market forces. “Rock ’n’ roll bands that *last* have to come to one basic human realization,” he writes, italicizing what is perhaps the greatest virtue — for an artist, a culture, or an institution — in his worldview, so shaped by loss. (As far as he is concerned, “The exit in a blaze of glory is bullshit.”)

The realization is: “The guy standing next to you is more important than you think he is. And that man or woman must come to the same realization about the man or woman standing next to him or her, about *you*. Or: everyone must be broke, living far beyond their means and in need of hard currency. Or: both.” The best business schools’ curricula recommend a similar blend of empathy and incentives nowadays.

When it comes to leadership, however, there is plenty new. “In my line of work,” Springsteen writes, offering a superb definition of leadership, “you serve at the behest of your audience’s imagination.” (A servant of imagination is a perfect contrast to [Napoleon’s classic definition](#) of leaders as dealers in hope).

And if you are fortunate enough to be entrusted with leadership — that is, with imagination on others' behalf — he is clear on what you are meant to do: “I am here to provide proof of life to that ever elusive, never completely believable ‘us.’”

I am here, in that line, is precondition for everything that happens after. Being there, in and of a place, is where leading begins. Then you must move. Songs need to get played, arenas to get filled up. But those are only means. A leader's job is to embody identity for a community — to give words and flesh to elusive ideals. (Only inside a body does an ideal get to become a story.) A leader's legitimacy, then, rests upon “how deeply you [can] inhabit your song.”

Let Purpose Find Your Craft

While the young Springsteen honed his craft every night in bars on the Jersey Shore, he enjoyed his growing popularity but felt that something was missing. “Part of getting there,” the most elusive of all Springsteenian ideals, “is knowing what to do with what you have and knowing what to do with what you DON'T have,” he writes.

That Springsteen's work never defines *there* might have helped fans give it the meaning they most wanted. For him, the book suggests, *there* is a combination of taking a stance, making it last, and having freedom to run. Holding on to what is precious without losing the open road. But if *there* is vague, one thing is clear: Getting there takes hard work. You can hone your craft and let purpose find you. But you can't hone your purpose and hope that craft will find you.

And purpose is what he did not have, for many years — the drive that comes from knowing your work is meaningful to you and valuable to others. “By 1977,” he recalls, “in true American fashion, I'd escaped the shackles of birth, personal history and, finally, place, but something wasn't right.... I sensed there was a great difference between personal license and real freedom.... I felt personal license was to freedom as masturbation was to sex.” It is a good reminder that purpose has a long gestation, and is borne of actions and encounters, not just ambition and doubts.

Within the next few years, a major shift in Springsteen's relationship to his work occurred. “By the end of the *River* tour,” he writes, “I thought perhaps mapping...the distance between the American dream and American reality might be my service, one I could provide that would accompany the entertainment and the good times I brought my fans. I hoped it might give roots and mission to our band.”

That is what purpose does. It gives a craft its roots and mission, a story to remember and imagine, a place to go from. Springsteen grasps the distinction between the *work* his music has to do, getting people turned on in Jersey bars or big arenas around the world, and its *purpose* — keeping the American dream alive — and never lets it go.

Purpose gives sense and direction to a working life spent on the road but, Springsteen's story cautions, does not spare you torment. There is plenty throughout his life and work: the torment of

depression, a struggle with his inner demons; the torment of talent, a struggle with the sense that he could always do more; the torment of service, a struggle with shouldering others' pain. If he often fails to make sense of that torment, at least he succeeds in making use of it.

Love Will Make You Better. Reflection Will Make You Last.

You must cultivate self-awareness to become a better leader. No admonishment is less questionable than that, and an autobiography could easily be framed as an attempt to follow it. But Springsteen's turns the fetish of self-awareness around.

There is plenty of self-reflection in the book, but little is conclusive, and it seldom helps much. Torment remains a puzzle, and at times a master, in his career and life. What really helps him is love and songs. He seeks the help — the love — of friends, family, therapists so that torment might find its way into a tune that can be shared. Because, he notes, "You can sing about your misery...but there is something in the gathering of souls that blows the blues away."

Self-reflection, Springsteen seems to say, echoing Hamlet's lesson, is not simply meant to help. Reflection tortures you with doubts. It slows you down. It is not meant to make you a better act. It is meant to make your act *last*. How? By forcing you to sit still when it would be easier to act out. By making you stay present to your questions so that your dream does not turn into obsession.

Training his inner gaze on his own questions ultimately lets Springsteen understand and sing the life of others. "Most of my writing is emotionally autobiographical," he declares. And it shows. The clearest pictures of what Springsteen values — of who he is — are seen not in the book's musings but in its descriptions, often one-liners, of others' characters.

He credits Bob Dylan with opening his eyes to "a truthful vision of the place I lived. The darkness and light were all there, the veil of illusion and deception ripped aside." He calls his late pianist Danny Federici a "sunny-side-up fatalist" with "the shortest highway between his fingers and his heart." U2 is a band that "plays for all the marbles every time." If those lines read as if they might as well apply to him and his band, it is because Springsteen, like many leaders, comes into focus best once he turns his gaze outward. That is what makes leaders authentic, letting their work reveal them.

Springsteen's Broadway show will take him to the smallest venue he has played in decades. It is a novelty with echoes of the old, of those bars and ballrooms he managed to break out from. That choice of stage reminded me of one more revelation in his book, perhaps the greatest one, which only comes in the last scene.

The man who taught us that we were born to run had never said much about "that place where we really want to go." The hope of "getting there," he showed, endures even while not knowing if there is such place. But riding his motorcycle, on the road, he is almost there at last. It took him 40 years and another *Born to Run* to say where it is: home. That is what leading does, in the long run, when it

works. It makes a new home for our stories. A home we can't escape, only return to, because it sets us free.

Editors' note: This article has been updated to clarify the timing around "Born to Run" and "The River."

Gianpiero Petriglieri is an [associate professor of organizational behavior](#) at INSEAD, where he directs the [Management Acceleration Programme](#), the school's flagship executive program for emerging leaders. A medical doctor and psychiatrist by training, [Gianpiero](#) researches and practices leadership development. You can follow him on Twitter [@gpetriglieri](#).
