

BASED ON THE LARGEST LEADERSHIP STUDY OF ITS KIND, INCLUDING CANDID
INTERVIEWS WITH PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE HEADS OF HARVARD,
GE, JP MORGAN CHASE, AT&T, AND HUNDREDS OF POWERFUL INSTITUTIONS

D. MICHAEL LINDSAY, PH.D.

WITH M.G. HAGER

VIEW
FROM THE
TOP

AN INSIDE LOOK AT HOW PEOPLE IN POWER
SEE AND SHAPE THE WORLD

092

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TEN YEARS IN THE MAKING, *View From the Top* is a true achievement. Books on power and leadership rarely present insights that are fundamentally new, and they seldom ground their conclusions in original scientific research. This remarkable book does both. It presents the key results of sociologist Michael Lindsay's unprecedented Platinum Study, an examination of how the most powerful people in the United States operate.

A few elite leaders in business and government make decisions that affect all 300 million Americans. Dr. Michael Lindsay set out to discover what sets this handful of influential people apart. Through in-depth interviews with 550 top CEOs and senior officials, including two former U.S. presidents and a sizeable group of Fortune 100 leaders, Lindsay learned that power is not a matter of luck or breeding, but follows a set of seven surprising—and surprisingly simple—principles.

The findings of the Platinum Study have the potential to change the way we think about leadership. The stereotypical image of the hard-nosed Ivy League boss who's always looking out for number one may ring true somewhere, but it completely fails in the upper echelons of leadership. *View From the Top* will surprise readers by demonstrating the compassion, hard work, and humanity that unites the most influential Americans. For the first time,

[continued on back flap]

Praise for *View From the Top*

“This is a seminal and compelling work. Dr. Michael Lindsay, university president and sociologist, gained unprecedented access to hundreds of leaders of America’s elite institutions, and reached many unexpected conclusions. For example, it’s not a privileged upbringing, but the influence of a caring mentor early in a developing career (as well as grit and opportunity) that launches careers of highly influential leaders. Dr. Lindsay found that the best leaders are not primarily ego-driven, but are able to influence a shared organizational vision and submerge their egos so as to be credible stewards of a greater cause. *View From the Top* reveals the hidden attributes of those blessed with the platform of leadership—and explores what defines a leader’s identity beyond the title on their business card.”

—**Rich McClure**
President, UniGroup
(United Van Lines
and Mayflower Transit)

“Michael Lindsay’s *View From the Top* recounts the experiences of a wide variety of leaders—in both success and failure—to reveal a deeper understanding of leadership: cause-oriented, people-driven, sacrificial, and reflective. Drawing from a variety of fields, Dr. Lindsay draws out some of the common elements of excellence. Anyone interested in the subject of leadership—or interested in exercising it—would benefit from reading *View From the Top*.”

—**Michael Gerson**
Columnist, the *Washington Post*

“This is an informative and inspiring book for any leader, drawing on unprecedented personal access and a keen sense of the dynamics of leaders’ institutions and personal lives. It contains both celebrations of the ways power can be used for good, and warnings of how slippery its effects can be on both leader and led. It is an indispensable catalog of stories and insights for those of us who want our use of power to be both effective and redemptive.”

—**Andy Crouch**
Executive editor, *Christianity Today*,
and author, *Playing God:
Redeeming the Gift of Power*

VIEW FROM THE TOP

UN DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD

VIEW FROM THE TOP

AN INSIDE LOOK AT HOW PEOPLE IN POWER
SEE AND SHAPE THE WORLD

D. MICHAEL LINDSAY, Ph.D.
WITH M.G. HAGER

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Cover image: Elevator Up-and-Down Button © Image Source/Corbis
Cover design: Chris Wallace

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada.

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ISBN 978-1-118-90110-6 (cloth); ISBN 978-1-118-90139-7 (ebk);
ISBN 978-1-118-901151 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

658-4092
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Introduction

“What? What does that mean, ‘I’m *not* the job?’” I could hardly hear Price, the search consultant, on my cell phone over the screeching of the subway car pulling in next to me. I was changing trains at the Park Street T station in downtown Boston, on my way to interview Diana Chapman Walsh, the highly successful president of Wellesley College. I had traveled to Boston from Houston—where I worked as a professor at Rice University—for a dual purpose. Not only was I completing additional interviews for my research project, but I had come to be interviewed myself. I was a candidate for the presidency of a Christian liberal arts college north of Boston, Gordon College.

“You *got* the job!” he repeated. This time I understood. In that moment, surrounded by strangers in that subway station, my life changed forever. I agreed to meet the board chair and the head of the search committee back at the hotel after the Walsh interview, and I hung up in a euphoric daze. I don’t know how I managed to find my way to the Cleveland Circle T stop where I met up with Walsh, but I sobered up as soon as we greeted. I had been conducting interviews with leaders like Walsh for years, but now I had an even keener interest in learning from her. What went well for her early on, and what missteps does she wish she could do over? How does she handle her critics, including her inner critic? The lessons about leadership and power that I had been picking up for years were no longer strictly academic but were suddenly, startlingly relevant.

In other words, my social-scientific study had begun to morph into something more. The insights I had been gathering, sorting, and coding from interviews I conducted became a second doctoral education of sorts for me—one where the professors shared not only their achievements but also their failings, where their personal and institutional lives were the curriculum, and where the student’s task was to synthesize these insights and then draw his own conclusions. What follows is, in essence, my “dissertation” from this priceless education.

The research took 10 years to complete and formed the largest study ever undertaken based on in-depth interviews with high-profile leaders in the United States. There is great diversity among the leaders I met; they work in different sectors, have different backgrounds, and pursue varied purposes. They include over 250 CEOs (including the leaders of 20 percent of the Fortune 100), former presidents Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush, and dozens of cabinet secretaries, members of Congress, and heads of federal bureaus and agencies representing nine White House administrations (from Johnson to Obama). Also included are more than 100 leaders of the world's largest nonprofit organizations, including the American Red Cross, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, and Harvard and Stanford universities. Working with a team of two dozen research assistants, I collected data on the lives and institutions of all 550 people I interviewed and then applied hundreds of analytic frames to their responses and life stories, searching for patterns as well as inconsistencies in their ascent to the upper reaches of power. The combined response rate of interviews requested was 87 percent.

The leaders in this study account for less than .003 percent of the United States population, but they have a disproportionate impact for such a small group. Their influence varies according to the power inherent in their positions, the dominance of their organizations, and the scope of their industries. While local elites can be found all over the world, leaders with global impact are clustered in major cities and commercial centers. So when I traveled to conduct interviews for this book—from Bar Harbor, Maine, to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii—79 percent of the meetings were in cities with over 1 million people. One-third of the interviews were held in New York City and Washington, D.C., alone. Half of the leaders I interviewed worked in business, a quarter in government, and a quarter in the nonprofit world (which includes higher education). I interviewed not only standing CEOs but also those who had recently retired or recently risen to their positions, allowing me to consider change over time. The average age of my subjects was 59, and they ranged from 27 to 91. Half are politically conservative, 41 percent liberal, and 9 percent do not identify either way. Among those who shared their religious identity with me, around 76 percent identify as Protestant, 9 percent as Catholic, 5 percent as Jewish, 3 percent as followers of another religion, and 8 percent as nonreligious.

People often ask me if I maintain relationships with the people I interviewed. In one way or another, I've stayed in touch with about half of them. Several of them have spoken at my college, and I have sought the advice of many others since assuming my current role. There is a bond that forms between two people when one of them shares her story of success and failure, of early life influences, and deeply personal motivations. And once you have established these relationships, there is a connection that can transcend rank or experience. Over and over again, I've found tight bonds between leaders who would seemingly have little connection.

In fact, without networks, I would have been unable to complete this study, as CEOs are not usually responsive to cold calls from social scientists conducting interviews for research. I had to rely upon my own connections to gain access at first. Then once I had a few interviews under my belt—President Jimmy Carter, Secretary James Baker, and the CEO of Walmart—more doors started opening. After interviews, I would also ask the leaders to recommend others who might be worth including in the study. I often even solicited their help in making the right connections. These recommendations from peers usually gave me the “in” I needed for scheduling my next interview.¹

I traveled all over the country to conduct the semistructured interviews (of 60 to 90 minutes), with approximately 10 weeks elapsing from the time the interview was granted until it was completed. During that time, my research team conducted background research on the informant. We typically conducted many hours' worth of background research for every hour-long interview. This allowed us to maximize each interview by avoiding questions that could be answered elsewhere. Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed, and informants had the option of reviewing the transcripts for accuracy (though only 8 percent chose this option).

Each interview was then combed through for qualitative analysis as well as coded for 122 variables that mapped the informant's demographic, social, professional, and network profiles.² Most of these data were drawn from the interview transcript, and additional data was drawn from electronic and print sources.

In this book, I do my best to evenhandedly portray top leaders, warts and all. I utilize narratives from the lives of individual leaders to explain general principles, but I acknowledge that this book presents

only part of the story for any single individual. I employ an analysis technique called critical empathy, developed by R. Marie Griffith, a historian of American religion at Washington University in St. Louis.³ The intention of critical empathy is to recognize and share the content and spirit of study participants' perspectives while also acknowledging a broader analytic framework that allows for additional interpretations. The point is neither to poke holes in participants' stories nor buy into every tall tale and justification. Rather, I seek to acknowledge the value of each leader's perspective while also evaluating his narrative account against the public record. After all, a benefit of studying senior leaders is that much has been written by and about them, providing background information for each interview. I also realize that collecting and analyzing interview data can introduce a number of biases, especially when these tasks are conducted by a team, but we followed standard conventions to minimize these potential problems.⁴ With all of these caveats, I think one of the greatest benefits of this study is its unique ability to shed light by revealing perspectives previously hidden beneath the surface. Talking directly to these leaders provided remarkable insight, and the size and scale of this study allows comparisons among them that previously could not have taken place in a systematic way.

PLATINUM LEADERS

Leader. Today the term is used lightly as both an ideal and a casual superlative. The title is applied liberally across fields and positions. Leadership is the subject of books and lectures, the dream of ambitious men and women, the goal of programs and elections, and both the savior and scapegoat of nations and companies. Much is made of leadership, but relatively little is known about the lives of those who sit atop the world's most powerful organizational pyramids. Who are they? How did they get there? And what do they do with their power?

It was in pursuit of a desire to know how power and leadership really work and can be used for pursuit of the common good that I undertook this research. As the interview transcripts piled up, I further began to identify a subset of leaders who held particular influence *and* skill at wielding it. These individuals are *platinum leaders*. In this book, I specify the three unique attributes of these leaders that distinguish them from their peers: (1) the scale of their organizational influence (they direct the

world's most significant institutions); (2) their penchant for maximizing opportunity and catalyzing change; and (3) their talent for garnering trust and goodwill, which opens for them doors of influence beyond the walls of their organizations.⁵ In the end, 128 informants (or 23 percent of the study population) are platinum leaders.

You may recall from chemistry class that platinum, the precious metal, is most commonly used as a catalyst in chemical reactions. The automobile industry uses platinum in the production of catalytic converters, and it has proven useful for many different applications. For example, it has a unique ability to assist with the conversion of crude oil into gasoline where it facilitates the joining together of certain molecules. Platinum also has been used for decades in chemotherapy treatments; it is especially effective in fighting aggressive cancers. Jewelers and watchmakers treasure platinum too, because—unlike gold—it neither tarnishes nor wears down.

So platinum is valued because of its rarity, its density, its multiple applications, and its durability. Platinum leaders are similarly special. They are catalytic in shaping the institutions they direct. They often have a transformative effect well before they hold real authority. And these leaders outlast their peers, using their networks, their opportunities, and even their challenges to advance their own visions for the common good. By disposition, platinum leaders are agents of change. And by position, they effect that change both within their organizations and *through* them to a larger world. In essence, platinum leaders outshine their peers and resist corrosion.

This book is for those who aspire to the top. Just as hopeful basketball players study the habits of great NBA stars, so also is it for those who want to be great leaders. We learn from the best. In my role as a college president, I want to apply the insights from my research to prepare our students more effectively and to sharpen the angle of their trajectory as they seek opportunities to make a difference in the world around us.

After spending thousands of hours analyzing the lives and institutions of these 550 leaders, I determined that many of our basic assumptions about power and influence are simply not true. What we think is important in preparing the next generation of world leaders matters very little, but some of the most significant forms of preparation receive scant attention.

At root, *leadership is the exercise of influence in the service of a shared cause*. There is no potential state of leadership; it exists only when action is taken. Power, on the other hand, is often latent. It can be activated by someone in authority, but it also can involve inaction—exerting influence by moving slowly on an issue or by preventing topics from being discussed. Social thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Steven Lukes have persuasively argued that power also involves the shaping of desires and beliefs. Securing the consent of others may be the least visible aspect of power, but it is most potent when it becomes taken for granted. This line of thinking emphasizes the *relational nature of power*. As Foucault writes, “Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies . . . in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up.”⁶

To best understand this relational nature of power, Chapter 1 explores the *matrix of power*, a nationwide—and ultimately global—crisscross of personal connections concentrated in major cities and at major institutions. We will see that great leaders in the matrix of power act personally, but they think institutionally. There is no dream team of one. Institutions, not individuals, wield the real, world-changing power. Practically every book about power focuses on the traits of individual leaders, but I insist that the most important trait of a leader is her ability to take the helm of a greater vessel that can cast a shadow far broader than her own. Success comes to those who wisely navigate their organizations to direct power to the right places. This is not to say that individuals are helpless slaves to an established system. Most certainly, people can—and do—change their institutions from the inside out.

LEARNING FROM STORIES AS WELL AS STATISTICS

In our data-driven age, we know more about people in power than ever before. It takes only moments to find the salary, biography, scandalous history, or political donations of prominent figures. But data points like these have little value beyond break room chatter. Much more intriguing and important are the aspects of these leaders revealed in this book: the tension between their roles as organizational heads and their identities as regular people with their own quirks, personal habits, and unique

histories; the programs and activities that *really* propelled them forward; how they prepare for and survive public failures that would send most people spiraling into despair. They may be positioned to exert great influence over society, but the substance of their influence depends heavily on core personal characteristics. Looking at their lives allows us to understand both their place in the world and how we, ourselves, can make a similarly meaningful difference.

Consider the career of Donna Shalala. The grandchild of Lebanese immigrants, she served in the Peace Corps before moving into a successful career in academia and, finally, national government. Her biographical details can be learned on Wikipedia. But you cannot understand Shalala's impact without understanding the greater context of how she herself views her life. How did she achieve her positions? Approach them? Manage them? Most importantly, what has she learned along the way, and what can that teach those of us with similar vision and ambition?

Shalala, like most young leaders, had an undistinguished childhood. Counter to what many people think, it doesn't really matter what future leaders do before they're 20. Shalala was a mediocre student as an undergraduate (again, typical). After serving as a Peace Corps volunteer, Shalala went into higher education because, as she candidly admits, she could not find a job as a journalist. Shalala followed no obvious path, but, like other leaders profiled in Chapter 2, she knew the areas where she was strongest and built careers around those strengths. She saw no opportunity in journalism, so she built a career as an academic based on her cultural and international experience.

All leaders start out with at least two things: potential and opportunity. Leaders can't control the hands that are dealt them anymore than you or I can. But they inevitably and often ingeniously make the most out of what they're given. They use this skill—the *ability to maximize opportunity*—to leverage their education, connections, and experiences toward success. For young people like Shalala, it starts with maximizing one key relationship (a mentor, a boss, a teacher) or skill; young people able to capitalize on these connections thereafter begin their ascent.

Professional life socializes us into becoming experts of particular domains, but Chapter 3 shows how platinum leaders cultivate what might be called the “generalist mind-set” early in their careers. Wide networks and broad knowledge pay off more than deep specialization

when climbing the ladder to the corner office. Executives at engineering firms, for instance, must not only lead with technical fluency; they set strategy, manage budgets, and communicate with internal and external constituents. The aspiring leader who keeps the most options open relationally (staying in touch with many different kinds of people) is most likely to develop the wide network required to move up at a faster pace. This requires a *liberal arts approach to life*. Would-be leaders must be dabblers of sorts, conversant in other kinds of business, knowledgeable about current affairs, and able to connect across divides. I found that this approach to life seems to come naturally only to some, but all platinum leaders figure out a way to develop it. You can discern it in others through simple things—their ability to converse at dinner parties with different kinds of people or the range of topics represented in the books they have stacked on their bedside reading tables.

Taking advantage of opportunities and capitalizing on connections lay the groundwork for success, but future leaders need a final push to enter the pipeline to power. I call this push their *catalyst*. Young people need catalysts rich with opportunity to see firsthand the broad, generalist perspectives required of senior leaders, even before they are ready to take on such roles themselves. Catalysts also distinguish young leaders from their peers, establish for them a strong foundational network, and give them the confidence to take the risks necessary for platinum leadership.

Donna Shalala's network of friends was essential to her ascent. Because of her connections, she ended up landing a position as an assistant secretary in the Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Carter. Connections also helped her get her next position as president of Hunter College (part of the City University of New York). Shalala next became the president of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and so the first woman to lead a Big Ten school. In her seventh year at UW–Madison, she was approached by the Clinton transition team to serve as secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS). Shalala had not been looking to return to politics, but she told me, “You can’t turn down a cabinet position.” Indeed, ambition is the spur for upward mobility. Shalala was secretary of HHS for a record eight years.

Unlike many leaders who feign humility, Shalala is not shy when it comes to touting her accomplishments. She told me, “Every place I’ve been, I’ve made better.” She continued, “You will not go to an

[continued from front flap]

Michael Lindsay has revealed the characteristics and behaviors of the people who shape the world we live in.

By shedding light on the inner workings of America's elite, this book serves as an inspiration and a guide for anyone who dreams of making it to the top. It's easy enough to be an effective leader, but to lead some of the most powerful institutions on Earth requires something special. Ambitious leaders and leaders-to-be will find guidance in firsthand stories and advice. The author allows the gurus to speak for themselves, and then follows up with helpful synthesis of leaders' candid revelations. The result is a book that stands alone among business titles in terms of both insight and impact. If you read only one business book this year, make it *View From the Top*.



D. MICHAEL LINDSAY is the president of Gordon College and one of the youngest college presidents in the country.

An award-winning sociologist and educator, Dr. Lindsay has lectured on five continents and worked with dozens of organizations to increase their leadership capacities. His Pulitzer-nominated book, *Faith in the Halls of Power*, was listed in *Publisher's Weekly* "Best Books of 2007," and his work has been profiled in hundreds of media outlets worldwide. He and his wife, Rebecca, live with their three daughters on the campus of Gordon College just north of Boston.

PRAISE FOR
VIEW FROM THE TOP

"Michael Lindsay continues to impress as one of the foremost thinkers on the topic of leadership. Drawing on a massive wealth of firsthand data, he clearly presents insights into what creates great leaders and more importantly, the attributes, skills and techniques each of us should add to our leadership arsenal."

—PAT GELSINGER

CEO, VMware

"If you ever wanted to know what the lives of top CEOs and national leaders are really like, read *View From the Top*. With a decade of in-depth interviews with Fortune 100 CEOs, U.S. Presidents, and leaders in religion, academia and philanthropy, Michael Lindsay reveals how they got there, why they do it, and the price they pay for power."

—KERRY HEALEY

President, Babson College

"*View From the Top* is one of those rare books in leadership research that deftly connects biography to the larger social structure and society. Interweaving the individual within the larger social context, Lindsay has written an important book for anyone who seriously thinks about how to create the conditions for inspiring future generations to seek passion and purpose, so that they can bring the moral and practical energies necessary to renew our political, social, and economic institutions."

—RAKESH KHURANA

Marvin Bower Professor of Leadership Development, Harvard Business School

"Michael Lindsay has personally interviewed more than 500 of America's premier business, political, and non-profit leaders—a research tour de force. What strikingly emerges from his inside portrait of the careers and views of those at the top is the value of seizing opportunity, navigating networks, and garnering trust. For an outside observer or future denizen of this national elite, *View From the Top* offers an invaluable and authoritative account."

—MICHAEL USEEM

Professor and Director of the Leadership Center, Wharton School,
University of Pennsylvania, and co-author of *Boards That Lead*

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ISBN: 978-1-118-90110-6

