



FLY FISHING FOR LEADERSHIP

John R Childress
with Christian Bacasa

Forewords by
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*The best leadership advice I ever got
was from a fly fishing guide.
Both knots and lips should be kept tight.*

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Chapter 1:
**WHY LEADERSHIP? AND WHY
FLY FISHING?**

Fly fishing shows you life in a day.

~Gilly Bate

Chapter 1:
**WHY LEADERSHIP?
AND WHY FLY FISHING?**

Leadership and learning are indispensable from each other.

~John F Kennedy

*Leadership is about creating an environment where people
can be their best selves, no matter what the circumstances.*

~Stan Golub

What is leadership? There are probably as many definitions of leadership as there are different types of trout flies. And each definition tends to be fit for the specific situation and context a leader is facing. The same is true for which fly to use. It depends on the condition of the water, the weather, the time of year, the temperature, and various other factors. No one leadership approach fits every situation, just as there is no one fly for all conditions.

Yet we know good leadership when we see it. Just as we know a good fly angler we meet on the river. It's not their age or equipment, or the flies stuck on their wader patch. It's the way they behave towards the river, the fish, the environment, their dog, and their fellow anglers. I always get a sense of calm and confidence when I am around a good fly angler, and it's the same feeling I get in the presence of a good leader.

Can we learn fundamental leadership principles through fly fishing? I believe, yes!

Excellence is not a gift but a skill that takes practice. We do not act 'rightly' because we are 'excellent.' In fact, we achieve 'excellence' by acting 'rightly.' -Plato

Today, perhaps more than any other time in history, leadership is required to help guide a world in crisis and chart a course for a sustainable future. Yet real leadership seems to be in short supply. There are many people with leadership roles and titles; President, Prime Minister, CEO, Congressman, City Councilor, Physician, Head Nurse, School Teacher, Parent. Yet the majority of people in the world sense a leadership vacuum. Why? What are we looking for in our leaders? I believe some of the answers lie in the principles described in this book.

We need global leaders to help focus the fight against a raging pandemic. We need CEOs who take a sustainable environment as seriously as they do share price, pre-tax profit, and quarterly returns. We need government leaders to make the careers of teachers, nurses, police, and social workers as important and financially attractive as banking and law. We need parents who teach their children the values of good leadership and stewardship, rather than abandoning them to television and computer games. I believe the world requires leaders who will work towards a better tomorrow and inspire by being role models and having the courage to make the hard decisions, not just the popular ones.

As I look through recent history, I notice that many world leaders, business executives, Pulitzer prize winners, and champion athletes were keen fishermen. A little known fact. George Washington, Revolutionary War general and first President of the United States, was, early in his career, a commercial fisherman.¹

Herbert Hoover was known as “the fishing president” and a true conservationist. Hoover opened and expanded the number of US National Parks, including the Everglades, Great Smoky Mountains, and Shenandoah National Park. In doing so, Hoover gave anglers access to fisheries for years to come. He even wrote a book called

“Fishing for Fun: And to Wash Your Soul.” In his book, Hoover famously wrote, “*All men are equal before fish.*”¹

Dwight Eisenhower, five-star general and America’s 34th President, started fishing as a young boy. After the war, he became a passionate fly angler, often spending time on Colorado’s rivers. And Ted Williams, slugger and outfielder for the Boston Red Sox, was inducted into both the Baseball Hall of Fame and the IFGA Fishing Hall of Fame. Robert Redford and western author Zane Grey were both inducted into the Fly Fishing Hall of Fame.

Ernest Hemingway was inducted into the IGFA’s Fishing Hall of Fame in 1998. Rick Porcello, starting pitcher for the Boston Red Sox, won the Cy Young Award in 2016. After a lackluster 2015 season, Rick spent the off-season fly fishing and getting his mojo back!

We can find leadership displayed on the battlefield, the baseball field, the classroom, the operating room, and the Boardroom. And if asked, I believe they would all say that fishing, and fly fishing, in particular, helped build and solidify their character, courage, and leadership skills.

So, how do we create more leaders? Through experience.

Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved. -Helen Keller

In the middle of the Second World War, Britain was facing a shortage of young officers. The task of developing young military leaders fell to Lord Rowallan, a Lt. Col. who was then Commandant of the Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre in Scotland. The HFTC was established in 1943 to develop leadership qualities in servicemen graded “NY” (Not Yet) by the War Office Selection Boards (WOSBs) searching for potential officers.

Lord Rowallan had a strong belief that if you first develop character, military leadership skills would follow. So, he put together a ten-week wilderness skills training in the Scottish Highlands. The training

at the HFTC was highly successful in developing character and leadership qualities in the cadets. The pass rate at the end of each 10-week course was about 70 percent, and most went on to be accepted by the War Office Selection Board.

The Rowallan Company was set up in 1977 in similar circumstances to address the high failure rate (70%) of officer cadets on the Regular Commissions Board. Since 1977, of the 2,900 cadets who started the courses, 65% were successful. Of the successful Rowallan cadets, 92% were successful on the subsequent Commissioning Course. Many of these reached high ranks in the service. An equally successful innovation was to admit women officer cadets to the Rowallan Company courses.

I find this approach fascinating because it was an intensive ‘non-military’ course designed to develop character, not military skills. Each participant took a turn at being the leader for one or more outdoor problem-solving challenges. They were graded on their effectiveness by an observing officer and by their peers. The training was filled with teamwork exercises interspersed with lectures on the character and traits of successful leaders.

I spoke with one of the former Commandants of Sandhurst, the British equivalent of West Point, who had glowing things to say about the young cadets who passed through the Rowallan program. Remember, these were the rejects, the Not-Yet Ready. He told me he would always look hard at the “Rowallan chaps” for a Cadet to head up special tasks.

*Leadership cannot be taught.
But it can be learned. -Harold Geneen*

WHY FLY FISHING?

“Feedback is the breakfast of champions.” -Ken Blanchard

*What fly fishing requires is that you step into nature
and accept it on its terms. -Tom Brokaw²*

As far as I am concerned, fly fishing provides almost instantaneous feedback; and plenty of it. Every cast gives feedback, every snag of a drifting nymph, every fly hung up in a tree, every day without a tug. These situations, and many more, give us essential feedback. While the average person may ignore these and mentally classify them as bad luck, the curious and determined learner will see them as opportunities to understand, rethink, re-rig, change flies, practice, and improve.

*There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation,
hard work and learning from failure. -Colin Powell*

And it seems that fly fishing, on the whole, attracts a curious, thoughtful type of individual. A recent search of the Library of Congress listed 1,189 books on golf and 4,413 books written about fly fishing.

*There are certain areas that I’m pretty good at, but certain
areas that I feel like I’m just starting, which is the cool thing
about fly fishing. You’re always learning. -Tom Rosenbauer*

And fly fishing takes skill. You can’t just “chuck and duck” in fly fishing unless all you want is arm exercise. Fly fishing requires a thoughtful approach since there are a hundred different things to get right to have some hope of catching a fish. And it’s only through experience, feedback, and rethinking your approach that you learn to become a competent fly angler. And the same is true of leadership development. Leaders aren’t born, nor are skilled fly anglers. They both develop through numerous and diverse experiences, seasoned with real-time feedback.

Finding a spot on the river that looks fishy, but is hard to reach, is an opportunity to improve. And I mean difficult. Perhaps you must wade through chest-high water and roll cast under a grassy ledge. Maybe it requires climbing over boulders and sliding down a bank where you can put your fly into a dark pool. You may have to push through tall willows and thick forest to fish a stretch of river where fish are rising just out of reach below low hanging branches you know will snag at least some of your flies.

If you embrace the tough spots on the river, a few things happen.

You build confidence. Moving around the river creates familiarity with maneuvering the unpredictable currents, rocks, and vegetation all rivers present. This translates into confidence.

You may just catch a fish. Chances are no one else has put in the work, or at least only a few. As a result, there is less fishing pressure and your odds of hooking up increase.

You push yourself a little past your comfort zone. This cannot help but make you a better fly angler. It forces you to be creative and develop problem-solving tools that will work in other, less demanding scenarios.

As you learn to read a river, there will be places that you might avoid. Don't. **Challenging yourself in fly fishing makes you better. This is true, regardless of your experience. Complacency is the enemy of progress.**

~Jason Shemchuk

Leadership and fly fishing are a curious combination of solitary and social endeavors. The classic phrase, “it’s lonely at the top,” not only refers to the role of the leader, but also the solitary fly fisherman out on the river. When difficulties arise, the only person you have to rely

on is yourself. While a leader may consult with their team, the Board, or constituents, the final decision is theirs alone.

Out on the river, the fly fisherman can fall back on previous experiences and lessons learned from reading or talking to others. However, the final decision as to which fly, how deep to set the nymph, whether to keep fishing or head home when the storm clouds roll in, are theirs alone. And it is this reliance on self, and the courage to take the decision, that builds character and competence in both leadership and fly fishing.

Excellence in leadership and fly fishing requires a thoughtful approach, ensuring you have all the best information for making a leadership decision, and a good understanding of the river and conditions when fly fishing. Rash decisions based on gut feel or *“I saw this situation in my last company, and here’s what we should do”* are often a design to fail. Fly fishing teaches us to think things through if we want to be successful. Or as Lincoln says, to sharpen the ax first.

“Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first four sharpening the ax.” ~Abraham Lincoln

Fly fishing also positively impacts our brain and biochemistry. An article about the neurobiology of fly fishing published in the Harvard Medical School, Mahoney Neurosciences Institute begins this way:³

In the mid-nineteenth century, the avid fly fisherman and physician James A. Hensall, MD, elucidated what for many is the allure of that often solitary form of angling. “Fly fishers,” he said, “are usually brain-workers in society. Along the banks of purling streams, beneath the shadows of umbrageous trees, or in the secluded nooks of charming lakes, they have ever been found, drinking deep of the invigorating forces of nature—giving rest and tone to over-taxed brains and wearied nerves—while gracefully wielding the supple rod, the invisible leader, and the fairylike fly.”

Recent research on the effects of fly fishing on well-being and quality of life among breast cancer patients comes from the Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing.⁴ Studying breast cancer patients who attended Casting for Recovery sponsored weekend fly fishing retreats showed a high degree of participant satisfaction, healing, and learning. Participants mentioned that interacting with other cancer patients, being supported by the fly fishing volunteers, group camaraderie, good nutrition, being in nature, and learning a new skill were all positive aspects of the program.

As a critical care nurse, I have an important leadership role to help my patients during the critical period of their care. And the lessons from fly fishing have helped me immensely. The transition from beginner to expert in both fly fishing and critical care nursing goes from unsure to confident. Fly fishing has expanded my confidence. I have traveled to many countries, fished with all different types of people from all walks of life, and had the opportunity to speak up and speak out about things I believe in.

~Heather Hodson

Humans have an evolutionary response to stress and danger, often called the “fight or flight response”. A perceived or real threat causes the release of adrenalin into the bloodstream, increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tightness. Once the danger is over, adrenalin quickly disappears, and our body returns to normal, restful functioning, allowing the brain to move out of reactive mode and into thoughtful, analytical mode. During stress, we mostly react without thinking; in a relaxed mode we can think things through more clearly. If you’ve ever been stressed and yelled at your kids, spouse, or an employee, then a little while later realized the anger was inappropriate, you know what this is all about.

According to the scientists, fly fishing is one of those activities where the body and mind can relax into an almost meditative state. Relaxation and meditation have positive, long term health benefits (for you and your relationships!). Those who fly fish take this understanding of relaxation, wellbeing and clearer thinking into their work world as well. Through fly fishing experiences, the leadership principle of slowing down, not making rash decisions, and thinking things through is more readily understood and practiced.

For me, fly fishing is a great way to reboot my overactive mind and stressful body from the pressures of leadership. I find my heart rate is significantly slower when I'm on the river. ~Brian Wetter

Fly fishing for Tarpon and handling a drift boat have both taught me a great deal about how tension and over-excitement can reduce one's ability to respond to challenging situations (like trying to land a huge Tarpon or facing oncoming river rapids). I learned pretty quickly that facing rapids with a racing heartbeat and tension greatly diminished my ability to read the river and react to oncoming dangers.

And the same is true for leadership. Getting overly excited and tense reduces a leader's ability to make effective decisions. And that nervousness gets quickly passed to employees, who then get tense, nervous, and insecure when they should be calm, clear thinking and agile in responding to a crisis.

~Chris Daughters

In these remaining chapters, you will find a series of leadership principles matched with successful fly fishing principles, using examples from business leaders, guides, lodge owners, and those in the fly fishing industry. When I first reached out to people about supplying stories and experiences for this book, nearly every

individual replied, “I’ve never thought about fly fishing and leadership together, but I now realize there are a lot of lessons to be learned.”

As a former Vice-Chairman of a global bank, investment fund manager, and seasoned Board member, I find the parallels between leadership and fly fishing fascinating. Fly fishing has both taught and reinforced my understanding and application of leadership principles. For example, three come to mind.

Expect Failure: if you expect failure, you will learn the value of patience, resilience, and humility. A key question I ask all potential leaders is: How do you react to failure? Give me an example of a failure and how you reacted.

Have a plan going in but be prepared to adapt your approach based on emerging realities. Those who chase Permit know this all too well. And those who manage people understand this principle.

Honestly evaluate the current situation – don’t kid yourself about the current realities and don’t underestimate the current difficulties you face. Cautious optimism is my philosophy in both business and fly fishing.

~Larry Marsiello

Diplomacy and fly fishing share many elements – patience, need for a systematic and in-depth approach, deception (oh yes! diplomats and fly anglers love it), and frequent travels. ~Stanislaw Cios