

**LEADERSHIP THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT WAY:  
TIMELESS STRATEGIES FROM THE FIRST LADY OF  
COURAGE<sup>1</sup>**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR ALISON MARTIN<sup>2</sup>

*Women who are willing to be leaders must stand out and be shot at. More and more they are going to do it, and more and more they should do it.*<sup>3</sup>

I. Introduction

In recent years, authors have studied the words and the lives of former presidents, political appointees, and even the occasional sports icon in an effort to find leadership principles that can be translated for use in everyday life.<sup>4</sup> In her book, *Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way*, Robin Gerber attempts to show how women leaders can also provide leadership wisdom.<sup>5</sup> The author derives leadership principles from Eleanor Roosevelt's remarkable life and tries to demonstrate how these principles can be "a model for personal achievement."<sup>6</sup> Gerber uses the biographical format because she is specifically targeting women readers and believes that "women respond to the narrative of whole lives."<sup>7</sup>

As a senior scholar at the Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland, the author has been training women in leadership for more than twenty years and has a unique perspective on the subject.<sup>8</sup> Her experience in the area of women's leadership allowed her to use this book to start a dialogue on the role of women, not just as leaders, but in all walks

---

1. ROBIN GERBER, *LEADERSHIP THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT WAY: TIMELESS STRATEGIES FROM THE FIRST LADY OF COURAGE* (2002).

2. U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 52d Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. 2 BLANCHE WIESEN COOK, *ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, 1933-1938*, at 372 (1992), noted in RUBY BLACK, *ELEANOR ROOSEVELT: A BIOGRAPHY* 138 (1940).

4. See, e.g., BOBBY BOWDEN & STEVE BOWDEN, *THE BOWDEN WAY: 50 YEARS OF LEADERSHIP WISDOM* (2001); JEFFREY A. KRAMES, *THE RUMSFELD WAY: LEADERSHIP WISDOM OF A BATTLE-HARDENED MAVERICK* (2002); DONALD T. PHILLIPS, *LINCOLN ON LEADERSHIP: EXECUTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TOUGH TIMES* (1992).

5. GERBER, *supra* note 1, at ix.

6. *Id.* at inside cover.

7. *Id.* at x.

of life.<sup>9</sup> Although the title of the book would indicate that it is simply another in the leadership genre, Gerber's underlying goal appears to be one of a continued fight for women's equality.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Analysis

Gerber developed a list of twelve leadership principles that she gleaned from the life of Eleanor Roosevelt. These principles include: "Learn from Your Past"; "Find Mentors and Advisors"; "Mothering: Training for Leadership"; "Learning the Hard Way"; "Find Your Leadership Passion"; "Your Leadership Your Way"; "Give Voice to Your Leadership"; "Face Criticism With Courage"; "Keep Your Focus"; "Contacts, Networks, and Connections"; "Embrace Risk"; and "Never Stop Learning."<sup>11</sup> Some of the principles Gerber advocates are the same ones included in most leadership books. Others are new and different, but Gerber appears to struggle to find stories from Roosevelt's life that match the principle. Still other principles are interesting, well developed, and worth reading.

### *Have I Not Seen These Before?*

Principles like "Learn from Your Past"<sup>12</sup> and "Find Mentors and Advisors"<sup>13</sup> were not particularly new or noteworthy. The author fails to distinguish these principles from other leadership books stating the same ideas. There are no startling revelations from Roosevelt's life that help to solidify these concepts or really bring them to life. Instead, Gerber uses the same themes that any student of leadership would already know.

Not only does Gerber fail to show why some principles are new or particularly important to Roosevelt's life, she also uses some principles

---

8. See *id.* at inside cover; see also James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership, *Staff Biographies*, available at <http://www.academy.umd.edu/aboutus/staff/rgerber.htm> (last visited Sept. 13, 2003).

9. See, e.g., Robin Gerber, *Don't Send Women to the Back of the Troop Train*, USA TODAY, Sept. 23, 2003, at 13A; Robin Gerber, *Golf's Grass Ceiling*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Aug. 2, 2002, at 11.

10. See GERBER, *supra* note 1, at xi.

11. *Id.* at xvii.

12. *Id.* at 1.

13. *Id.* at 21.

that are very similar to each other. Thus, “Learning the Hard Way”<sup>14</sup> reads a lot like “Learn from Your Past,”<sup>15</sup> while the chapter on “Find Mentors and Advisors,”<sup>16</sup> could easily have been addressed by the section on “Contacts, Networks, and Connections.”<sup>17</sup> For example, in “Learning the Hard Way,” the author notes that in 1918, Roosevelt discovered that her husband had been carrying on a long-term affair with her social secretary, Lucy Mercer.<sup>18</sup> Roosevelt realized she could not control her husband’s behavior, so she chose to focus on her own goals and priorities and gradually forgave her husband’s indiscretions.<sup>19</sup>

Gerber believes that difficult situations can make or break a leader. “What sets a leader apart is how he or she handles the lowest points, the darkest hours.”<sup>20</sup> The author demonstrates that good leaders use difficult times to strengthen their own resolve and make positive changes within themselves, which sounds a lot like her lessons she listed in “Learn from Your Past.”<sup>21</sup> In this chapter, the author notes that Roosevelt had a privileged but emotionally difficult childhood. Roosevelt learned how to take a “positive view of otherwise painful memories”—this can be a model for one’s own growth.<sup>22</sup> The author raises some important points in these chapters, but fails to distinguish them from one another. The concepts may have been more effective and more meaningful if Gerber had merged them into one principle.

#### *Deductive vs. Inductive Search for Leadership Principles*

For other principles, Gerber seems to have to stretch to find corresponding examples. In “Mothering: Training for Leadership,” the author tries to show how Roosevelt believed that motherhood was a training-ground for life.<sup>23</sup> Gerber explained that mothers have to be very orga-

---

14. *Id.* at 65.

15. *Id.* at 1.

16. *Id.* at 21.

17. *Id.* at 203.

18. *Id.* at 70.

19. *See id.* at 72.

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.* at 65.

22. *Id.* at 17.

23. *Id.* at 58-9.

nized and disciplined—early descriptions of what we would today call “multi-tasking.”<sup>24</sup>

In her description of Roosevelt’s role as a mother, the author details how a team of nannies, maids, and other personal assistants always assisted Roosevelt as she moved from her summer home to her winter home.<sup>25</sup> Rather than serving as a good demonstration of how mothering skills can translate to leadership skills, the scenario seems to be a reflection of a socially significant, very wealthy wife who is perhaps a bit spoiled. It is difficult for the average person to derive leadership principles from someone who led that kind of lifestyle and more difficult to make the leap from mothering to leadership in the traditional corporate structure, much less to a military unit. Thus, not only does the author sometimes stretch to find stories from Roosevelt’s life to fit a principle, some of the principles seem to have very narrow applicability.

#### *A Must Read*

Despite some problems in the way she addresses certain principles, Gerber provides excellent leadership advice in other chapters. Most noteworthy are: “Find Your Leadership Passion”<sup>26</sup>; “Your Leadership Your Way”<sup>27</sup>; “Give Voice to Your Leadership”<sup>28</sup>; “Face Criticism With Courage”<sup>29</sup>; and “Keep Your Focus.”<sup>30</sup> These chapters are well researched and presented. Gerber does a particularly good job of laying out a framework for applying some of these more amorphous principles—these chapters deserve a more detailed description.

#### “Find Your Leadership Passion”

Eleanor Roosevelt’s first foray into the political arena came quite by accident when a wealthy Republican offered her a position on the board of the New York League of Women Voters.<sup>31</sup> This position was the first in

---

24. *See id.*

25. *Id.* at 60.

26. *Id.* at 83.

27. *Id.* at 105.

28. *Id.* at 131.

29. *Id.* at 155.

30. *Id.* at 177.

31. *Id.* at 86.

many when Roosevelt found her “leadership passion, her sense of mission.”<sup>32</sup> Roosevelt’s childhood experiences, the loss of her child, and her husband’s transgressions “led her to a driving desire to improve the lives of those less fortunate than she.”<sup>33</sup>

Gerber uses Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to show that one is never truly happy unless they are doing what they are best suited for—the best leaders are those that work in an area for which they have great passion.<sup>34</sup> Gerber encourages leaders to discover what they value most. To find out, leaders must ask themselves many questions: “Who do you admire and why? What captures your thoughts and imagination? Whom do you choose to spend time with? What do you read?”<sup>35</sup> After answering those types of questions, one can find passion, live that passion, and take steps to build on that passion.<sup>36</sup>

#### “Your Leadership, Your Way”

By the time her husband was elected President, Eleanor was the most powerful political woman in the state of New York.<sup>37</sup> She continued to be active in politics and women’s causes when she became first lady, but had to find a new way to carry out her duties in her new role. Gerber’s application of this leadership principle is that women “often have different ways of leading and make different impacts on organizations than men.”<sup>38</sup> She encourages women to be bold and not risk-averse. Women can use a traditional organization’s framework to carve out niches and create new positions.

#### “Give Voice to Your Leadership”

After Franklin Roosevelt assumed the presidency, Eleanor gave the “first on-the-record press conference by a wife of a president.”<sup>39</sup> The new first lady used these conferences to give a voice to women’s issues, work-

---

32. *Id.* at 87.

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* at 88.

35. *Id.* at 91.

36. *See id.* at 92-103.

37. *See id.* at 107.

38. *Id.* at 111.

39. *Id.* at 133.

ers' rights, and poverty law. Although she was very cautious not to undermine her husband's agenda, she sometimes deliberately made controversial statements in an effort to cause public comment about divisive issues.<sup>40</sup> Gerber notes that strong communication and advocacy skills are critical tools for an effective leader. She points to Roosevelt's life as proof-positive that a person can improve and develop her speaking skills. Additionally, Gerber encourages leaders to "cultivate creative communications strategies" and use them to further one's leadership mission.<sup>41</sup>

#### "Face Criticism with Courage"

Although Roosevelt was extremely popular with certain segments of American society, her controversial statements alienated other groups and sometimes caused problems for her husband's presidency.<sup>42</sup> Gerber argues that critics should not sway leaders from their purpose.<sup>43</sup> Instead, she encourages leaders to get out and gain a better understanding of the issues before taking a stand. If one is a truly passionate leader, one is bound to face her share of critics, but this should not sway a leader from her mission.<sup>44</sup>

#### "Keep Your Focus"

As the 1930s ended, America found itself on the brink of war. Roosevelt continued her fight for her original causes, but shifted the tone and linked her "vision to values of patriotism and democracy."<sup>45</sup> She also started working for the rights of African-Americans to serve in the military and pressed political parties to work together because she predicted that America would get involved in the evolving conflict in some capacity.<sup>46</sup> The author notes that leaders must have the flexibility to continually update and even transform their visions as the situation requires. Transformation does not mean, however, that a leader has to lose her focus.

---

40. *See id.* at 136-38.

41. *Id.* at 138-44.

42. *See id.* at 157-60.

43. *See id.* at 160-61.

44. *See id.* at 165-75.

45. *Id.* at 186-87.

46. *See id.* at 183-85.

Instead, Gerber advocates that leaders maintain their focus while recognizing that the means and methods to their ultimate goal may change.<sup>47</sup>

#### General Considerations

Gerber effectively uses interesting examples from Roosevelt's life, and also presents tips on how the reader can apply these principles to the modern world. She uses recent studies and other research to show how women in leadership positions are changing the shape of corporations and other organizations. She also uses many photographs that show Roosevelt's travels around the world and ways in which she influenced women everywhere. The author, however, still struggles with the limited applicability of these leadership principles. Although they are very interesting and may be easily applied to a person searching for life's meaning and self-actualization, these principles are not easily applied to the corporate world and are even more difficult to link to military leadership.<sup>48</sup> While we all understand the importance of ideas like finding a passion in life and embracing it, that concept is not necessarily compatible with working in a large company or a government agency.

Another weakness with this book is its citation. Gerber effectively uses quotations from Eleanor Roosevelt, historians, and other leadership experts, but she does not use pinpoint citations in the endnotes, which makes academic review very difficult.

An additional criticism is that the "On Leadership" style does not necessarily do justice to Roosevelt's contributions to society. Roosevelt worked tirelessly for the needs of the underprivileged and completed her tasks in such a way as to give dignity to even the most oppressed. While Gerber effectively derives leadership principles from Roosevelt's life in some chapters, she also seems to struggle to find "Eleanor" anecdotes that fit a predetermined list of leadership principles in other areas of the book. Themes like "find a mentor" and "take risks" do not adequately capture Roosevelt's originality and creativity.<sup>49</sup> Gerber's career in the leadership

---

47. *See id.* at 186-201.

48. *See id.* at inside cover.

49. Interview by Ali Velshi with Joel Kurtzman, Partner, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, and regular book reviewer, CNNfn (Oct. 15, 2002).

field seems to have limited the framework with which she viewed Roosevelt's remarkable journey through life.

### III. Conclusion

Eleanor Roosevelt's triumphs and tragedies are inspirational in and of themselves. Although the author effectively uses stories from contemporary women's lives to help illustrate different leadership principles today, these examples do not easily translate to traditional careers.

Another limitation of these examples is that they are gender-specific. Even though the author's stated purpose was to provide principles of leadership, she acknowledges that her review of Eleanor Roosevelt's speeches, letters, and books motivated her to continue to fight for equality for women.<sup>50</sup> In the months surrounding the release of this book, Gerber wrote numerous articles in national publications addressing issues concerning women's equality.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, regardless of the title of the book, the reader should be prepared for a platform to launch discussions on women's issues rather than a book of general applicability on leadership.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the shortcomings of some of the principles and perhaps the leadership format, this book is a recommended read. Eleanor Roosevelt led a remarkable life, and it is interesting to see how she transformed herself and the role of the First Lady and became a leader, albeit in a non-traditional way.

---

50. See GERBER, *supra* note 1, at xi.

51. See, e.g., Gerber, *supra* note 9, at 13A; Robin Gerber, *Finally Equalize Sexes in Combat*, USA TODAY, Apr. 22, 2003, at 11A; Robin Gerber, *Team Sports Create Leaders*, USA TODAY, Feb. 26, 2003, at 13A; Robin Gerber, *Women Hone Leadership Skills on Career Breaks*, USA TODAY, Jan. 9, 2003, at 11A; Robin Gerber, *Finding the Best Woman to Run for the White House*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Jan. 8, 2003, at 9; Robin Gerber, *Golf's Grass Ceiling*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Aug. 2, 2002, at 11.

52. It is interesting to note that many of the favorable book reviews do not address the merits of the book, but rather praise Eleanor Roosevelt's dignity and courage. See, e.g., Aliza Pilar Sherman, *Required Reading: We've Got Your Summer Reading List--Books to Inspire You, From Women Entrepreneurs*, ENTREPRENEUR, July 1, 2003, at 32; Cord Cooper, *Roosevelt's Better Half*, INVESTOR'S BUS. DAILY, Nov. 11, 2002, at AO3; Kelly DiNardo, *Learning from Eleanor Roosevelt*, USA TODAY, Oct. 28, 2002, at 5B; Paula Voell, *Eleanor Roosevelt Continues to Lead the Way for Women*, BUFF. NEWS, Oct. 18, 2002, at C4; Helen Thomas, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Perfect Role Model*, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, July 9, 2002, at B4.