

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

INTERPRETING BUSINESS IN FILM:  
THREE CASE STUDIES IN CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

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BY  
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PREVIEW

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# SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

## GRADUATE STUDIES

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the creative characteristics and behaviors of business leaders are portrayed in selected modern films. Using the specific genre of the biographical film as the medium, the study investigates how each film protagonist depicts particular traits and levels of creative action in business, as identified in leadership literature of the late twentieth century. The selected American films include *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, *Bugsy*, and *The People vs. Larry Flynt*.

In *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, Preston Tucker is portrayed as a heroic automotive visionary trying to operate in a world dominated by the Big Three in Detroit. Presented as a devoted husband and family man, he is committed to breaking the existing automotive paradigm and political machinery through perseverance, humor, and team resourcefulness.

In the film *Bugsy*, Benjamin Siegel dreams of building a gambling mecca in the desert, a place eventually recognized as Las Vegas. Unpredictable and violent, he nonetheless possesses the dedication to a vision that extends far beyond the economic worries of his crime family partners.

In *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, the adult magazine publisher Larry Flynt is devoted almost exclusively to the pursuit of money and material wealth. Self-promoting and overindulgent, Flynt still shows creative leadership in his ability to unabashedly copy and market an existing business model for his own purposes.

As the actions of each protagonist take visual shape through three unique

biographical films, the similarities and differences of the main characters serve as excellent illustrations of themes identified in late twentieth century leadership literature.

PREVIEW

## DEDICATION

TO DENNIS . . . WE DID IT

PREVIEW

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am blessed to have a number of remarkable individuals in my life. These people helped me through a very sad and difficult time. I have no doubt their faith and encouragement sustained me. To them, I say a most heart-felt thank you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the closing years of the twentieth century, American businesses found themselves in exciting times. Domestically, there was tremendous economic prosperity, low inflation, a strong focus on customer service, and a multitude of products/services vying for consumers' discretionary dollars. Further, opportunities for overseas growth were plentiful, with emerging countries viewed as potential profit centers.

Yet, while the late twentieth century was an exciting time for organizations, it was also a disturbing time; for while American businesses still attained their tried-and-true quantifiable economic objectives—financial gain and increased market share—they had also come to recognize that the traditional management model of the twentieth century no longer assured organizational success. Certainly the basic managerial tenets still applied: Profit maximization, customer satisfaction, and institutional stability continued to be necessary to insure a company's viability. However, additional factors—decidedly intangible and qualitative—gradually became part of the mix for late twentieth century businesses. Elements such as vision, risk taking, change management, and innovation took on new meaning and were becoming vitally important to organizational practices. In the truest sense, the rules of the business game changed, and, not surprisingly, are still undergoing revision. In truth, the efforts made by companies to understand and to integrate those new workplace

elements into daily operations have become a much discussed topic among today's leadership theorists, including Warren Bennis, Rosabeth Kanter, John Kotter, Margaret Wheatley, and Peter Drucker.

### **Selected Films**

An examination of the visual illustrations of those elements in selected film depictions of three creative leaders in twentieth century business is the focus of this dissertation. The films chosen are *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, *Bugsy*, and *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. The thesis will focus upon two specific areas: 1) the identification of themes within leadership literature of the late twentieth century and the correlation of those themes in the selected film biographies, and 2) how the sensory depiction of character and action gives biographical films a distinct value as a tool to study business leadership.

The characters chosen present well known, controversial male figures who engage in creative thinking, a popular subject in the leadership literature of that time. Their film stories not only highlight important business conflicts and dilemmas, but offer a unique sensory perspective on the entrepreneurial mind and the degree to which innovative strategies succeed or fail.

In *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, Preston Tucker is portrayed as a heroic car visionary trying to operate in a world dominated by the Big Three in Detroit. Presented as a devoted husband and family man, he is committed to breaking the existing automotive paradigm and political machinery through perseverance, humor, and team resourcefulness.

In the film *Bugsy*, Benjamin Siegel dreams of building a gambling mecca in the desert, a place eventually recognized as Las Vegas. Unpredictable and violent, he nonetheless possesses the dedication to a vision that extends far beyond the economic worries of his crime family partners.

In *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, the adult magazine publisher Larry Flynt is depicted as a man devoted almost exclusively to the pursuit of money and material wealth. Self-promoting and overindulgent, Flynt still shows creative leadership in his ability to unabashedly copy and market an existing business model for his own purposes.

### **Selected Leadership Themes**

There are several important themes from the leadership literature of the late twentieth century that can be found in the selected film biographies. First, the films show that the traditional management model does not always satisfy the needs of individuals within organizations. The model's clinical approach to employee issues emphasizes predictability and conformity, while minimizing originality and uniqueness. Viewed primarily as a task related process, typically associated with efficiency, productivity, and stability (Yukl 1994, 4), the conventional managerial wisdom portrayed in the films promotes "sameness" and can be detrimental when the business competition is fierce, demanding immediate and decisive action.

During the span of time under discussion, the ability to change and embrace ambiguity is a second important theme found in the leadership literature. Dealing with turbulent business situations is viewed as a sign of mental

flexibility and adaptability—finding ways to improve products, induce greater sales, or to promote greater customer satisfaction demands sharp, agile cognitive skills. Through selected confrontations and interactions, the film protagonists demonstrate the importance of that ability and how its implementation can help transform everything from product development to organizational cultures.

A third relevant theme in leadership literature of the late twentieth century revolves around the process of creativity and the strong need for creative work within modern businesses. Innovative individuals are inclined to view professional problems and situations from unusual perspectives; this is often at odds with established policies and procedures. The film characters not only illustrate how unconventional approaches to business challenges can be executed, but they also reveal how those approaches can be met with varying degrees of corporate acceptance and success.

While the value of creative individuals and their work is recognized by leadership theorists of that period, the literature also acknowledges a “problem” with such individuals; that is, while they may be needed by business, creative people are not necessarily understood or fully appreciated for their ideas. Again, the film depictions reveal how each leader faces psychological moments of isolation and crisis, while outsiders appear as threatened by the character’s creative personality as much as the character’s new idea.

Much research has been devoted to the topic of leadership, just as the importance of creativity continues to be discussed in prominent business circles.

What, however, can be learned from connecting the three identified themes and the two subjects of leadership and creativity to film?

It is clear that film has tremendous appeal because of its highly visual nature; yet, that appeal can extend far beyond the visceral to afford greater meaning. A biographical film can be used to educate or to entertain (Custen 1992, 5-7). The viewer of such a film is now involved in a full sensory experience, as the words used to reveal a life leap from the printed page to unfold upon a screen. This unique aural and visual adventure offers a very different perspective for the participant, even if what is depicted is not always authentically represented or true to its original form.

In these biographical films, the movie portrayals of the three creative leaders are based on real people and real events, with each film highlighting selected personal and professional struggles. Decisive moments—revealed largely through the movie elements of character and action—allow one to “see” personality characteristics unfold in the films: there is creative exhilaration in an ordinary instant, when Tucker accidentally stumbles upon the perfect sales opportunity he desperately needs; for Bugsy, there is the singular commitment to a vision, born while he silently studies the barren Nevada desert; and, with Larry Flynt, a seemingly casual and unassuming conversation ignites his entrepreneurial spirit and launches a war to dethrone a business giant.

In short, as the talents and abilities of these film depictions take visible form, they act as relevant illustrations of late twentieth century leadership literature. These illustrations also provide opportunities to identify and to analyze

specific characteristics associated with effective leaders. In several ways, then, the biographical film—through the elements of character and action—serves as an educational tool that can help better illuminate aspects of leadership literature identified during the selected time period.

As each theme is analyzed and characteristics of each movie leader are fully examined, distinctions will be raised between two existing business models: the quantitative/traditional management model and the qualitative/leadership model. To fully appreciate the thematic differences the selected films will subsequently illustrate, it is now necessary to present the important distinctions between management practices and leadership principles.

The existing management paradigm is viewed as an influence process that is decidedly task-oriented and productivity based; primarily, it promotes standardization and specialization. There are prescribed functions in management, which have given rise to a series of proven and pragmatic steps. These steps have been traditionally aimed at maximizing profits and achieving organizational goals.

As business operations over the last century grew to favor large scale production, company functions or activities became clearly delineated; currently, they usually include planning, budgeting, organizing, and controlling (Kotter 1988, 21-22). Each of these functions identifies particular responsibilities that are formally segmented from other departmental responsibilities; additionally, each function depends upon a systematic and uniformed organizational approach for assigned responsibilities to be completed. For example, the function of budgeting

deals primarily with financial issues—calculating expenses, determining profit or loss, granting or refusing fiscal requests, etc. Those who work in this area, then, are concerned and consulted about issues of importance regarding finances; the priorities of other departments—say, planning or research—are of little concern.

The creation of separate departments encourages employee conformity and predictability within the workplace, while fostering an isolated and fragmented perspective of how a business “works.” Accentuating particular job skills and abilities to complete specified functions promotes a mechanistic approach to organizational issues and reinforces an impersonal emphasis upon business priorities (Yukl 1994, 4; Bennis and Nanus 1997, 85; Drucker 1995, 17). Clearly, conventional management thinking has been aimed at “minimiz[ing] disturbances, variations, and change” (Youngblood 1997, 10) in an attempt to preserve a system that is predominantly closed, segmented, and generally unresponsive to unsolicited pressures.

In truth, this paradigm is closely aligned with the Cartesian/Newtonian outlook, which is rooted in the seventeenth century. This approach to business issues promotes a reductionist perspective of the world, and maintains that a mechanistic viewpoint can rationally explain the complexity of any system. The whole, then, should be seen as nothing but a collection of reducible parts, only requiring the tools of logic, rationality, and objectivity to explain its inner workings (Capra 1982, 60-62). One leadership expert wryly acknowledges how times have not changed; she points out that, three hundred years later, inflexible Newtonianism is still present and still employed in the business arena:



It is interesting to note just how Newtonian most organizations are. The machine imagery of the spheres was captured by organizations in an emphasis on structure and parts. Responsibilities have been organized into functions. People have been organized into roles. Page after page of organizational charts depict the workings of the machine: the number of pieces, what fits where, who the big pieces are. (Wheatley 1992, 27)

Attempts to standardize existing practices are not isolated to profit-driven businesses; in truth, what has occurred in modern organizations is linked to a larger cultural shift that includes technology. While definitions of technology are offered from a variety of disciplines, they share underlying similarities with contemporary management principles. When technology is defined by economist John Kenneth Galbraith as “the systematic application of scientific or other organized knowledge to practical tasks” (1985, 11), a corresponding similarity to managerial methodology and objectivity is readily apparent. Other viewpoints note relevant connections. Ethicist Ian Barbour underscores that the successful application of technology is linked to the use of “ordered systems of people and machines” (1993, 3), a position which is comparable to managerial dependence upon routine and pattern. Another perspective philosophically calls technology a mechanistic and closed system, which, like management, relies almost exclusively on rationality and efficiency to achieve its objectives (Ellul 1964, xxv). One final viewpoint reveals still more correlations, as political scientist Langdon Winner says technology includes “skills, methods, procedures, [and] routines . . . [that emphasize] a “purposive, rational step-by-step way of doing things . . . .” (1977, 12). Here, then, are the initial managerial/technological connections; their significance will become more evident as this study subsequently probes the

relationship between each movie protagonist and his organizational environment in greater depth.

While management and technology both stress performance consistency and uniformity, leadership is an influence process emphasizing work that “focuses [not] on systems and structure . . . [but] on people” (Bennis 1989, 45). Viewed as less scientific and less measurable than management, leadership is an inherently life-affirming process; interactions can be unpredictable, open ended, and highly interpretive. Control is not the ultimate aim; rather, there are conscious and positive attempts to gain the trust of others, to harness the energy of individuals for a greater purpose. An effective leader is constantly seeking ways to engage, to empower, and to inspire followers. By simultaneously acting as a direction setter, visionary, change master, and persuasive communicator, the leader stresses a holistic, balanced and comprehensive approach to organizational issues. In short, while “the manager does things right [,] the leader does the right thing” (Bennis 1989, 45).

Within this process is the vital component of creativity. Perceived by a leader as a valuable business tool, creativity also validates the very human qualities of tenacity, determination, imagination, and ingenuity. Such characteristics attest to the existence and perseverance of a life force broadening the scope of knowledge by its own eager choice. Mentally aware, flexible, open to [one's] surroundings and alert to any possibilities (DePree 1989, 48-51), the creative individual can develop new ideas that can radically alter or eliminate existing ones. This ability allows one to encounter standing paradigms without

emotional bias and to deal with them as the situation—not the business structure—warrants. Such a spirited and creative nature brands this person as a leader uniquely different from even other effective leaders.

### **Methods and Goals of the Study**

In the examination of the outlined areas, the methodology used for this dissertation is a qualitative analysis involving three major components: a selected study of leadership and creativity; an analysis of character and action within the three films; and a study of the biographical film genre as the chosen technological vehicle.

As previously noted, the examination and interpretation of the chosen films occurs within the parameters afforded by leadership literature of the late twentieth century. For this researcher, then, the “particular activity [the interpretation of movies] can only be understood in conjunction with understanding the context in which it occurs” [leadership literature of the late twentieth century] (Rudestam and Newton 1992, 35). This means the writings of that fixed time period act as the hermeneutical framework in which the movies—the “texts” of research—are analyzed.

The methodology used to select the chosen films mirrored the steps found in the syntopical approach to reading. This multifaceted and complex thought process builds upon an individual’s gradual digestion and understanding of extensive readings in order “to construct an analysis of the subject that *may not be in any of the books* [previously read]” (Adler and Van Doren 1972, 20). The “readings” for this study were the films and initially, different genres were

considered, including westerns, thrillers, film noir, and military films. Many classic films were also watched; they included *Sunset Boulevard*, *High Noon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Casablanca*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *Citizen Kane*. Various popular movies, such as *Working Girl* and *Norma Rae*, were viewed so that different perspectives on leadership might also be considered. Thus, after numerous hours of film viewing and the systematic reflection of each movie, the decision was made to focus upon the biographical genre and the three selected films within that genre.

As each area is fully examined, the contribution this dissertation attempts to make will become clear. The selected films will support the research on leadership and creativity of the late twentieth century in several ways. First, the chosen film portrayals will delineate particular traits, characteristics and behaviors that the identified literature associates with creative leaders. Additionally, a breakdown of each movie portrayal in terms of the internal attributes of the individual—such as risk taking, vision, motivation, and charisma—and the external factors beyond the leader's control—such as the corporate culture and working conditions—will take place. This completed analysis will help determine, what elements, if any, place creative leaders in a category separate and apart from leaders in general.

Next, these film portrayals will offer visual evidence as to what a creative leader “looks” and “sounds” like. There must be specific examples of inspirational appeal, persuasive communication, and visionary drive in the film characters of Tucker, Bugsy, and Flynt that can be identified as visual affirmations of the

research of that time period. Additionally, the nature of creativity itself can be further explored by studying particular actions of these movie characters that roughly correlate to “degrees” of creative thinking; these degrees include the initial discovery of a unique idea, as well as an idea developed through a process identified as “creative imitation” (Drucker 1985, 220).

A final reason for the importance of this dissertation is that the biographical film genre offers a distinctive value to the study of business leadership because of its unique ability to connect scholarly research with a popular form of mass technology. The selected films provide opportunities to identify and to analyze specific characteristics associated with leadership and creativity. This takes place when the film elements of character and action are used to “break down” each movie portrayal: internal thoughts assume visible shape; decisive movements are externally represented; and psychological frustrations become tangibly expressed.

Thus, within the selected films, many of the relevant concepts and approaches to innovative thinking can be easily identified. The real world business issues involving visionary leadership, product development, financial resourcefulness, and market competition make themselves known in the decisions and actions that become visually depicted in each film.

Film presents images and words that create a singular experience for the viewer. It provides a unique visual and aural encounter that extends the opportunity for a deeper appreciation of shared values and ideas. The film protagonists selected are remarkably dissimilar in their approaches to solving

personal and/or professional difficulties, but they do share one important bond—literature of the late twentieth century identifies them as relevant illustrations of leadership behaviors and creative thought in action. This dissertation will analyze those illustrations, and in doing so, will offer a new perspective on the way existing theory can be connected with the film depictions of three creative leaders in business.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The three areas of literature review pertinent to this study include management, leadership, and creativity. Given the expansive nature of the materials available—there are approximately 850 definitions of leadership (Bennis 1997, 4) and over 30,000 books and articles written on leadership in the last century (DuBrin 1998, 2)—appropriate limitations were made. With regard to management and leadership, the selected literature represents the work of prominent and “classic” leadership and/or management experts of that period; they are primarily well-known, well-respected academics, many of whom have extensive business consulting backgrounds. Additionally, since this study deals with thematic correlations to particular movie depictions, the ability to clearly understand and to “translate” written theoretical leadership concepts through the visual medium of film became an important consideration.

#### **Management/Leadership Books**

As noted in the previous chapter, the conventional management model is one that emphasizes productivity, efficiency, and specialization. It seeks to minimize disturbances and maximize stability. The following management theorists are individuals who either provide an excellent overview of the total paradigm, or furnish an important perspective on selective managerial activities that are relevant to an analysis of film character and action.

Harvard Business School professor John Kotter delineates the important philosophical and procedural differences that exist between management and

leadership in large scale businesses in *A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management* (1990). His findings are the result of a two part study; almost 200 senior executives participated in his examination of effective leadership situations in identified corporations. Kotter concluded that, while management and leadership are both necessary for organizational success, they are distinctly different processes; furthermore, when properly understood, these processes complement each other and help an organization maintain its position in the marketplace. Leadership, according to Kotter, initiates effective change and develops a cohesive vision; management, on the other hand, is a series of functions that focuses upon procedural control and organizational consistency. As the basis for his investigation of locating effective business situations, Kotter uses various institutions. From this study of organizations, he is able to further refine issues uniquely associated with leadership and consistently discussed among leadership experts; those issues include a thorough analysis of the leadership process —direction setting, alignment, and motivation—as well as the structure and origins of leadership. The identification and discussion of the three elements within the process of leadership are particularly noteworthy, since this study is concerned with the visual depiction of leadership themes and concepts.

Two other books by Kotter, *The Leadership Factor* (1988) and *Leading Change* (1996) are part of his ongoing thesis that leadership is a critical—and, yet, often missing or underutilized—component of organizational strength and success. The former text is based on the results of four related leadership