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10-2003

# Review of Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way: Timeless Strategies from the First Lady of Courage. Robin Gerber.

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# Book Review

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Jean Haar

**LEADERSHIP THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT WAY: TIMELESS STRATEGIES FROM THE FIRST LADY OF COURAGE. Robin Gerber. New York, NY: Portfolio. 317 pages.**

*"Women, whether subtly or vociferously, have always been a tremendous power in the destiny of the world. . . ."*—Eleanor Roosevelt (cited in Gerber, 2003, p. 106).

## Introduction

Eleanor Roosevelt died on November 7, 1962. At that time, I would have been three years old. I grew up knowing nothing more about Eleanor Roosevelt than the fact that she was married to President Franklin Roosevelt. Gerber's (2003) book, *Leadership the Eleanor Roosevelt Way: Timeless Strategies from the First Lady of Courage*, changed that for me. The book provides a wealth of information about Eleanor Roosevelt as a woman and as a leader. Jadwiga S. Sebrechts, President of Women's College Coalition, noted, "Whether one reads this book for historic information, for behavior strategies, or for motivation, one will not be disappointed" (Gerber, 2003, p. i).

## Overview

The book is both a biography and an analysis of Eleanor Roosevelt's leadership skills. Each chapter begins with a story about Eleanor Roosevelt's personal and professional experiences. The stories are followed by references to leadership research, examples from contemporary women leaders, and suggests for improving individual leadership skills. Each chapter ends with leadership advice entitled "Eleanor's Way."

Each of the twelve chapters focuses on a leadership lesson. Twelve lessons are described and analyzed: (a) Learn From Your Past; (b) Find Mentors and Advisers; (c) Mothering: Training for Leadership; (d) Learning the Hard Way; (e) Find Your Leadership Passion; (f) Your Leadership Your Way; (g) Give Voice to Your Leadership; (h) Face Criticism with Courage; (i) Keep Your Focus; (j) Contacts, Networks, and Connections; (k) Embrace

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Risk; and (l) Never Stop Learning. The chapter subheadings provide guidance through the lessons. The bulleted list of advice at the end of each chapter is a synthesis of the material. The book concludes with an Epilogue, Notes, and Resources.

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The strength of the book comes from the artfulness with which Gerber intertwines the components of Roosevelt's life with leadership research and leadership lessons. Gerber transitions from specific events in Eleanor Roosevelt's life to quotes from scholars such as John Gardner, Peter Senge, James Kouzes and Barry Posner, Margaret Wheatley, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Helen Astin and Sally Helgesen. The leadership lessons are embedded in the stories of Eleanor Roosevelt, and Gerber skillfully. Gerber shaped the book around the chronology of Eleanor Roosevelt's life.

### **Eleanor Roosevelt**

“If there are essential threads that can be pulled from Eleanor’s story of leadership, they are her adherence to her values, her keen assessment of people’s needs, and her ability to motivate those around her to take responsibility and work for change” (Gerber, p. xxix). These threads are unraveled as the story of Eleanor Roosevelt’s life is told. Gerber begins with Eleanor Roosevelt’s solemn childhood, orphaned at age 10, and moves through the stages and events of her life including her appointment to the first U.S. delegation to the United Nations at the age of 61. Gerber concludes the book by describing the extensive travel Eleanor Roosevelt completed during her later years—travels designed to further the humanitarian causes close to her heart. The Epilogue acknowledges her death and legacy.

### **Leadership**

Bolman and Deal (1995) contended that, “Leading with soul requires giving gifts from the heart that breathe spirit and passion into your life and organization’ (p. 12). Leading with soul depicts Eleanor Roosevelt’s life. James MacGregor Burns described Eleanor Roosevelt as a true leader (Gerber, 2003):

She exemplified the qualities of leadership that scholars have identified as crucial. First of all, she responded to people’s fundamental wants and needs—especially those who are disadvantaged. Second, because she was innovative and creative in her ideas about how we can improve not only our own lives but also those around us. Third, because she knew that to fight for grand but controversial principles meant that inevitably one comes into conflict with others, and she never shrank from a grand fight for principle. But above all . . . she was an outstanding leader because of her ethical standards and her values: She believed in ethical conduct both in public and private life and she believed in the great principles that have guided America from the start (summed up in the glowing words of the Declaration of Independence, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and its commitment to equality) (pp. v-vi).

Throughout the book, Gerber provides stories, quotes, and examples that demonstrate Eleanor Roosevelt’s leadership skills and her ability to

teach by example. Many of the practical leadership lessons are familiar to those who have studied leadership. For instance, Gerber uses the following quote from John Gardner, author of *On Leadership*: “In leadership at its finest, the leader symbolizes the best in the community, the best in its traditions, values, and purposes” (p. 19). Burns stated: “The transforming leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower” (p. 189).

The concepts of transformational and moral leadership (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1992) are also presented in the text. Gerber (2003) examines “the values, tactics, and beliefs that enabled Eleanor Roosevelt to bring about transformational change” (p. xxiii) in herself and in the world. In chapter nine, “Keep Your Focus,” Gerber summarizes, “Eleanor emerged in wartime as a transforming leader and moral agent, undeterred by setbacks” (p. 190). “For Eleanor, building leadership in others was at the heart of lasting change” (p. 194).

### **Characteristics of Women Leaders**

“[S]erving others is a basic principle around which women’s lives are organized; it is far from such for men” (Sergiovanni, 1995, p. 136). Wachs Book (2000) noted that collaboration and fostering relationships, characteristics of women leaders that were once ridiculed, are now viewed as advantages. Eleanor Roosevelt’s commitment to serving others as well as her focus on collaboration and relationships are evident. Eleanor Roosevelt possessed a number of characteristics associated with women leaders (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Helgeson, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1995). Gerber (2003) comments, “Eleanor faced a test similar to women leaders. Each new context, each new challenge presents the same question: How can I act on my leadership vision in a way that feels authentic to my leadership instincts?” (p. 110).

Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) attributed characteristics such as trust, compassion, empowerment, and understanding to women leaders. Astin and Leland (1991) used such words as inventive, creative, and risk-taking. Eleanor Roosevelt displayed these characteristics. In Chapter eleven, “Embrace Risk,” Eleanor Roosevelt comments, “What matters now, as always, is not what we can’t do: it is what we can and must do” (p. 228). In chapter five, “Find Your Leadership passion,” she states, “Work is easier to carry if your heart is involved” (p. 84).

## Conclusion

Inspired by Eleanor Roosevelt's *Women's Home Companion* column, "I Want You to Write to Me," Gerber concludes with a request similar to one Eleanor Roosevelt had in her first column:

If this book has inspired your thinking about leadership and life, as I hope it has, I would like to hear from you. What is your *leadership way*? What are the best leadership lessons you know, and the stories behind them? In the spirit of Eleanor Roosevelt, perhaps we can help each other. (p. 317)

Gerber achieves her goal of writing a book that combines history and leadership advice while also catering to women's appreciation for narrative. She notes, "We [women] talk to each other about all aspects of our lives, weaving the knowledge into an elaborate pattern of relationships that crosses the boundaries of family and work" (p. x). Gerber's work offers women an inspiring road map to heroic living and a model for personal achievement. The reader can experience the same type of transformation Gerber experienced: "Writing this book changed me . . . Eleanor led me to reflect on my leadership, focus on my passion, and get 'fired up' about acting on it" (p. xii).

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