



# **A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service**

*Robert M. Gates*

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**A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service** Robert M. Gates

From the former secretary of defense and author of the acclaimed #1 best-selling memoir *Duty*, a characteristically direct, informed, and urgent assessment of why big institutions are failing us and how smart, committed leadership can effect real improvement regardless of scale.

Across the realms of civic and private enterprise alike, bureaucracies vitally impact our security, freedoms, and everyday life. With so much at stake, competence, efficiency, and fiscal prudence are essential, yet Americans know these institutions fall short. Many despair that they are too big and too hard to reform.

Robert Gates disagrees. Having led change successfully at three monumental organizations—the CIA, Texas A&M University, and the Department of Defense—he offers us the ultimate insider’s look at how major bureaus, organizations, and companies can be transformed, which is by turns heartening and inspiring and always instructive.

With practical, nuanced advice on tailoring reform to the operative culture (we see how Gates worked within the system to increase diversity at Texas A&M); effecting change within committees; engaging the power of compromise (“In the real world of bureaucratic institutions, you almost never get all you want when you want it”); and listening and responding to your team, Gates brings the full weight of his wisdom, candor, and devotion to civic duty to inspire others to lead desperately needed change.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service Details

Date : Published January 19th 2016 by Knopf

ISBN : 9780307959508

Author : Robert M. Gates

Format : ebook 256 pages

Genre : Leadership, Nonfiction, Business, Biography, Management, Politics, War, Military Fiction, Audiobook

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# **From Reader Review A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service for online ebook**

## **Daniel says**

Fantastic book. Gates uses his lessons learned as the Director of the CIA, President of Texas A&M, and Secretary of Defense to write about leading change in large bureaucratic organizations. Gates focuses on a leader's ability to build teams and break down stovepipes as essential elements of strategic leadership. In building teams, Gates reflects that changing an organization may require a leader sacrifice speed of change with a gain of getting change right. Slowing down the pace allows for greater buy in of a program, as well as better developed recommendations from all those involved.

Gates also reflects on the value of investing in personal relationships to help in gaining support for change proposals. This may mean frequent meetings with academics and state legislatures while serving at a public university, or taking the time to engage with people on the hill while serving in the Pentagon or at Langley. It is a fast read, and worth the time to do so.

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## **Matt Heavner says**

deserves a regular re-read/review (just did a re-read, and I still agree. lots of good thoughts on leadership from a fantastic perspective)

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## **Chad Manske says**

One of the very few books I reserve for a five-star rating! Simply indispensable reference from a true American leader--former CIA Director, Secretary of Defence, Texas A&M President, and not leader of the Boy Scouts of America. Gates shoots straight, much like he did in his previous book, Duty, yet here he shares his accumulated wisdom on leadership more narrowly, sharing why he believes some things work and why they don't based on his experience working at very high levels. For leaders, you will resonate with the many recommendations, suggestions and stories he shares, ready to employ them yourself now or in future leadership opportunities. A must-read book that now goes on my highly recommend list!

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## **Justin Tapp says**

I work in state government and have seen all the "barnacles" that Gates describes. I am closely observing how our newly-elected Governor, Matt Bevin (R), with no prior political experience, tries to lead Kentucky's executive branch bureaucracy through transformative change (my observations at the bottom of this review). I find it encouraging that a manager of billion dollar budgets would write a book specifically targeting leadership and management in government bureaucracies. He admits that much in the book is "common sense," but adds that the reader may be surprised how little actually exists in government management; Gates is exactly right, unfortunately. However, I felt that this book fell short of Gates' goal: making government a more encouraging place for Millennials to want to work, rather than shunning it as they increasingly do. He does little to prescribe anything specific toward the concerns of Millennials. I listened to Gates' recent

interview about the book at the Council on Foreign Relations; he does a better job critiquing specific leaders and policies and stating the purpose of the book in the interview than he does in his writing. In his memoir *Duty* (which I loved), Gates was rather revealing in his criticism of specific policymakers and leaders; there is nothing like that in this book. I recommend *Duty* over this one, especially for more specifics about how Gates had to work and negotiate the Defense budget with the White House. Someone once said "where you find a leader, you find a reader," but Gates doesn't mention many books that were influential to his leadership-- a big disappointment, if not a red flag.

"Everyone hates bureaucracy," even those who work in them their entire lives. Gates worked in three different bureaucracies to trim the inefficiency and advance them into more modernity-- The CIA, The Defense Department, and Texas A&M. 95% of the book focuses on these three institutions, while the rest is autobiography and some mentions of the Boy Scouts and a few companies (Chili's, Starbucks) for which he serves on the Board. In government, you're usually legally limited in what you can offer by way of pay raises and advancement. Most leaders are short-term appointees, even if short-term means a full four-year term. He or she is then limited in what they can do, the budget he inherits, and not inclined to rock the boat. Gates had to reform the Defense Department's employee review system, it seems more archaic than the 360 degree method used at the State Department. In government, there is limited ability to mark someone down negatively on their performance reviews. Like Gates, I've seen supervisors inflate reviews positively in the hopes that another agency will hire the sub-standard employee away; there is little ability to fire someone.

Sec. Gates understands this environment and argues it is still possible to have transformative change and boost the morale of everyone, making the department or agency more efficient and productive. One book I kept thinking of in reading Gates' work is *The First 90 Days* by Michael Watkins (I highly recommend, especially if you're in a bureaucracy or an institution with any history or tradition). Gates does not give many specific prescriptions about how to go about implementing change quickly in a bureaucracy, but just some basic guidelines. Be aware that "outside ideas automatically generate antibodies within the organization." Gather input from stakeholders, inside and out, and set your goals "quickly." Make your goals known to everyone, and empower those beneath you to figure out how to accomplish them. Reach down to low-level employees for input, include them in the process. This will boost morale and give the Chief a greater understanding of how things look at the ground level. He encourages the reader to first gain respect of long-term employees and approach them with new ideas first; once they buy in, they will bring everyone else along.

Most of his "chafing against institutional tradition" stories come from Texas A&M, which is a different culture than most people outside of Texas realize. He first fought a battle to become President, his nomination was opposed by Governor Rick Perry, who made the fight personal. (Gates adds that he tried sending handwritten notes to Perry but never got a response.) When he wanted to increase racial diversity, he got pressured by university stakeholders and politicians. (Sadly, some in elected office privately agreed with him but publicly blasted him.) He simply let everyone feel the need to vent, and calmly pushed ahead because he knew it was the right thing to do. He was successful in seeing his minority initiative take hold and grow the diversity of the campus by (sadly) a large amount. He included students on his major decisions, including budgets. He reached out to many on campus, getting to know people from the bottom up before he announced any initiatives. Another initiative was to fire the AD and hire a new football coach to reinvigorate the base of football boosters and to empower Deans on their budgets and decisions. Gates moved power from trustees to a larger body that included councils made up of the deans of the colleges, requiring everyone make one-year and five-year plans by department, including specific goals of what would be accomplished in those years. He also worked to make A&M a more-recognized teaching university, initiating awards for faculty (I can't believe they didn't do this until his tenure).

Another weakness of the book is that Gates doesn't lay out his criteria for when to push back, when to compromise, and when to give in. When students started a living wage campaign, he started a working group to study the situation over the objection of certain stakeholders. While he personally disagreed with the need, he gave workers a modest raise. A&M has a large endowment plus money from Texas oil, so budgeting may not be much of a concern-- just look at what donors were willing to pony up for athletics facilities to compete with UT Austin. Where he had money, he spent it to placate his opposition, be it students or US Senators.

Gates doesn't write too much about institutional change at the CIA or Dept. of Defense. He mistakenly began his time at CIA with a scathing critique of the organization that led to hostility he would later regret-- live and learn. He would eliminate Don't Ask Don't Tell in the army and considers this a success, but omits the bit from his memoir of his anger at the Obama administration for pushing too fast and getting ahead of the formal review process previously negotiated on with the White House. Similarly, he has pushed the Boy Scouts toward more inclusive policies toward homosexuals.

The key to change is to focus on how people do their jobs, not where. Leave the organizational charts alone, focus on the efficiency of the tasks everyone actually performs. In implementing your strategy, make it clear that the outcome is the same for every goal. Form working groups and task forces so that everyone feels they are a part of the process. I was surprised he did not mention the importance of "red teams," people with an outside view to critique the assumptions and strategies. (That seems to be much more common at the CIA today than in Gates' time.) Include a clear timeline with your strategy. Gates spends an hour a day on his daily agenda alone, and how it fits into his larger strategies. Be sure to heap praise on workers at every level, but keep the BS to the minimum.

The most interesting advice comes in regards to the media and leaks: accept them, embrace them, "the media is not a hostile force." Gates would not have known troops needs for MRAPS or the scandalous conditions at the VA without the media. While he does disdain leaks of intelligence that put people in harm's way, he accepts leaks on major programs or budget decisions since it is taxpayer money and ridiculous to expect an airtight ship of thousands of employees who are affected by every cut. The leader should avoid opaqueness in the budget process, in any case. He urges political leaders not to be condescending to the media; "the media will always have the last word." Likewise, encourage candor among employees. Candor helps identify problems. He does mention that leaders who won't accept criticism or candor typically have insecurity issues and are poor leaders. Gates, however, does not talk about negativity or dealing with toxic attitudes among subordinates.

But Sec. Gates coyly explains that in diplomatic positions you have exercise self-discipline to put a lid on your candor in front of your patrons or superiors. "Never miss a good chance to shut up." "Always suppress the urge to blow up regardless of how stupid the idea is that you are hearing." Several in Congress were surprised to read of Gates' disdain for them in his memoir-- he gave no such hint of his disgust while in office. He exhorts the reader also not to be "little Stalins," those who make sure everyone obeys their whims or face punishment. He points out a few commanders and superiors he's met who were "jackasses" and Gates always told cadets they would work for at least one in their careers-- learn to deal with it and resolve not to be one yourself when you get a command. He encourages the leader to "fire incompetence instead of micromanaging it" but that contradicts his earlier understanding of how hard that is to do within the government merit system.

The book that comes closest to this one in my library is Colin Powell's *It Worked for Me*, which lays out his principles of management (more readable and applicable than Gates' work; interestingly, Gates doesn't mention Powell. Gates would seem to agree with Powell's principle "Don't be a busy bastard," don't be a

workaholic such that your subordinates feel they have to match the effort to gain your favor. Gates did not work on Saturdays as a rule and let his subordinates go home. (I would note that Gates' successor Leon Panetta flew home to California most weekends with a similar mindset.)

Another merit to Gates' style, and perhaps something he has picked up from private companies he has worked with, is his belief that organizations should be aware of how they impact the community. He was briefed daily on conflicts between military bases and their civilian surroundings. He encourages open forums to talk to community leaders. Organizations, like their leaders, should be seen as having impeccable character. He reminds us that while the corrupt get media coverage, the best leaders have good character. Sometimes they don't get glory because they learned to compromise. He points Republicans to Ronald Reagan - Reagan said "take the deal if you can get 60% of the rest, you can come back for the rest later." Listen to views that are different, even if they are crazy. Plenty of times at Defense they would read an analysis that on its whole was "insane" but contained some kernels of truth or nuggets Gates hadn't considered. Gates closes the book with a rant on Congress for its polarization and unpopularity, further discouraging young people from considering public service.

My observation of newly-elected Governor Bevin is that his playbook is similar to Gates. He has reached down to low-level employees, letting lower-level staffers attend and voice opinions in meetings critical to forming his budget. He also encouraged all employees to email in ideas just before releasing his budget. (That maneuver was interesting because his budget decisions had already been made; perhaps some minor tweaks were made due to employee suggestions.) He invited them to his State of the Commonwealth and recognized them publicly.

Governor's Bevin's first budget contains the "intestinal fortitude" (Gates) of not budgeting to zero. While the cuts were widespread, there were some programs largely spared, so it was strategic and not completely across-the-board-- and Gates would agree with this strategy. Bevin implemented a hiring freeze, and Gates maintains such a freeze should not last longer than a year; it disrupts the flow of recruitment and replacement, and is dangerous for morale and efficiency. Further, implementation of Bevin's cuts was delegated to the Cabinet Secretaries and program Commissioners. Bevin has, by and large, been slow to replace previous non-merit appointees. Gates was similar, adopting a philosophy of working with the previous administration's appointees until he could figure out who he could or could not work with.

Bevin's biggest departure from the Gates playbook has been with the media. Several writers covering the state have written of his harshness and condescension, both on the campaign trail and in office. Gates would remind Bevin that this is a long-run losing strategy because the media will always have the last word. The positives of the media (exposing corruption, finding mistakes to be corrected, etc.) outweigh the costs.

In all, I give this work 3 stars out of 5. I might highly recommend it if you are in government without a clue how to manage, but there are 100 books better than it if you work in the private sector without the same constraints. Gates leaves too much out that is critical to good management.

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## **Gordon says**

I've always enjoyed listening to Robert Gates speak and reading what he writes. I greatly enjoyed the opportunities I had to observe him in meetings dealing with Afghanistan and the very hard issues that required tough choices and tough decisions...which he always made with clarity. I also greatly enjoyed the several times I saw him interact with troops or preside over recognition ceremonies...always humble, modest,

and genuinely engaged. Thus, you might say I was pre-disposed to like this book. However, I didn't give his book *Duty* the same high rating. His latest book compares his experience in three very different organizations (CIA, Texas A&M, DoD). It provides principles and suggestions with numerous personal examples (positive and negative) to make his points. Focusing on how senior leaders in public service should lead change and lead their people, his principles or suggestions are sound and insightful. I found his approach to the media, politicians, the public, and external stakeholders (alumni, veterans) especially useful for senior leaders.

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## **Dan Graser says**

There are a ridiculous number of books available on leadership in very specific and general categories, however, Robert Gates' reflections in this work are heads and tails above the rest of the heap. This is true mainly for two reasons: First of all, Bob Gates is one of the most decorated leaders currently alive having successfully lead Texas A&M, the CIA, and as Secretary of Defense, and secondly, he writes honestly and thoroughly being general when necessary and quite specific and blunt as well.

Rather than engage in meandering, platitudinous generalities, Gates establishes his more general claims and qualities early on, then very clearly shows how failures and mismanagement could have been avoided in several of his positions and where very clear and specific ideas worked and why, and the summarizes why these methods and attributes are needed in public service today. Particularly interesting for me is how he dealt with several obstructions from state and local forces when working at Texas A&M and how he effectively worked within an academic culture, no easy feat.

Also his concluding remarks on the difference between being a manager and being a leader are fantastic and filled with insights into the type of leadership that is effective and is very much needed in public service today. His frequent referencing of John Adams' quote on this matter is very apropos to our current situation, "Public business my son, must always be done by somebody - it will be done by somebody or other - If wise men decline it others will not; if honest men refuse it, others will not."

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## **Roy says**

Really good book, and I think actually useful to leading change. The book does 3 things well: it defends public service as a noble and valuable profession; it draws strong and, to me, credible lessons about what is really necessary to effectively lead change that should apply to any leader; and it addresses how these lessons apply especially, and are most needed, in very large bureaucracies like the Department of Defense, and Texas A&M. I think this is the first book that addresses the role of leading change in national security organizations that I have ever seen, and, as such, provides a really useful companion to the "leadership in crisis" work that makes up most leadership books related to national security. Gates makes very specific and useful suggestions on what to do when you want to lead reform in large organizations, things you can actually implement (although some of them really apply only at the CEO level). He also makes a lot of comparisons between leadership of public bureaucracies and of private corporations, and makes a case that, in general, he finds a lack of leadership in both places, and believes that is the source of much of our people's decreasing faith in institutions, and argues that good leadership, focused on improving institutions, provides us with a way back from the quagmire of distrust we have seen in the last few administrations.



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## **TK421 says**

Every leader--regardless of leadership experience--should read this book. It is a transformative map of ideas, implementations, and tough questions.

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## **Zohar - ManOfLaBook.com says**

For more reviews and bookish posts please visit: <http://www.ManOfLaBook.com>

A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service by Robert M. Gates is a non-fiction book in which Mr. Gates talks about transforming large organizations from the inside. Mr. Gates has previously been Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), president of Texas A & M University, as well as Secretary of Defense.

Robert Gates is one of those people that when I see them speak on TV, or hear them on radio/podcasts, I always stop and pay attention to what they have to say. When I saw A Passion for Leadership: Lessons on Change and Reform from Fifty Years of Public Service by Robert M. Gates I knew that I had to pick it up and check out what Mr. Gates has to say.

I was not disappointed, the book is a tell all narrative on how to manage and implement change in vast organizations. Mr. Gates builds a narrative which is not only full of substance, but an interesting read and flowing narrative.

Mr. Gates has taken leadership jobs in large bureaucracies, each job broadened his responsibilities and understanding of management and change. I was fascinated, but not surprised, to learn that the politics at the University of Texas A&M are just as vicious as they are in Washington DC.

Mr. Gates talks about being the only government official who, in his job as Secretary of Defense, transitioned from the administration of George W. Bush to the one under Barak Obama. Mr. Gates tells fascinating stories about the powerful people he had dealt with, while negotiating egos and world problems.

Mr. Gates does not only talks about problems, but also offers solutions which would reflect well on employees at all levels, in all industries. Even though this book talks about issues at large organizations, at very high levels, I found it not only readable, but also highly relatable.

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## **Allison Salva says**

This really is not a political book. It's not even an academic book but really just Gates' 50 years of expertise on leadership and eliminating sluggish bureaucracy in the public and private sectors. Self-help books are not normally my thing, but I figured that maybe I should try and "improve" myself this year by adding a few to my repertoire. I was not disappointed. Not only was Robert Gates an incredible leader, turns out he is also a

pretty decent writer. I typically don't take leadership advice from just anyone, but seeing as how he was the CIA director, president of Texas A&M, and Secretary of Defense (under 2 presidents), I figured I could deign to hear him out.

In a lot of ways this book was about power and how to use that effectively or...not. To me, having power seems like a whole hell of a lot of work and half the time I'd rather just escape to the mountains and be content with the fact that no one is counting the days till I return. As the old saying goes, "The cemeteries are filled with indispensable men." But then again, there is such a beauty to a strong, uncorrupted leader in the big worlds of politics and (inter)national intelligence...probably because it is seemingly so rare. And in THAT sense, power is more appealing. People that are dedicated to the common good and wellbeing because we truly are our brother's keeper. Real solidarity. I love that. And that's really what this book is about, in my humble opinion. Gates remarks that while a lot of CEOs and politicians out there aren't the best leaders they can be, don't lose hope. There are plenty of men and women behind the scenes with integrity and strong leadership skills. Guess we just need them to come out of hiding...

Anyways, the reason I am giving it 4 stars instead of 5 is because this book is probably mostly relatable to people who are already in some position of leadership and can directly apply lessons learned here. I enjoyed it and think there is plenty I can glean from this book, but I'd say you definitely need to have an interest in the topic in the first place. I'm also fascinated by the world of intelligence and so his details about the CIA and experience as Secretary of Defense were amazing to me. There are many other general leadership books that could accommodate people from different walks of life, but this one stood out to be because of Gates' experiences. If that interests you too, then I highly recommend it.

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### **Chainsaw says**

Not "amazing," per se, but well worth a 5-star rating. Best book I've read on leadership in a very long time, and I have read many over the past 40 years or so. The author leverages his diverse and extensive leadership experience in both the public and private sectors to deliver a spot-on summary of attributes that are key to effective leadership, as well as highlighting common negative characteristics that can undermine a leader's initiatives and overall effectiveness. Most highly recommended!

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### **Michael says**

This is a biased review... I have a great deal of respect for Secretary Gates, having served under him when he was Secretary of Defense. It's so great to hear his take on reforming the large organizations he's been a part of, the CIA, Texas A&M University, Department of Defense and the Boy Scouts of America. The fact that he served affectively in the same position for two different presidents from different parties, is an indication of how honorable a man he is and how valued his opinion is. If you think of yourself as a leader and a reformer, this is a must read.

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### **Barry Bridges says**

I attended my daughter's graduation in 2006 at Texas A&M. The President of the University spoke a few minutes as his last official duty. he was soon to depart to be Secretary of Defense. He was humorous,

articulate, clearly a leader, and not like any other university president that I had ever heard. I thought he was the commencement speaker with the wit and advice he delivered. But his job that day was to introduce the commencement speaker. How do you follow Robert M. Gates? The answer would be with an astronaut that delivered an even better speech.

This book was a pleasure to read - not because of it being a scandalous expose, not because of the witty writing, but simply because Gates is a great man and a great leader. Why can't a man like this run for president? Because he is busy being a leader instead of an ego. Gates guides any willing follower through making impossible change in impossible, tradition bound organizations - the CIA, the Department of Defense, Texas A&M, and now the Boy Scouts of America. Worth paying full price for the hardback and keeping it as a reference for years to come.

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### **Jimmy says**

I usually do not wax poetic about public figures, especially those in politics. I try to remain objective which more often than not means that I am harsher in my judgments of things or people I like. I love Robert Gates and go out of my way to work with and for him. Knowing this, I read *A Passion for Leadership* trying hard to be objective about it. Even given my aforementioned predisposition towards such scenarios, I loved this book.

I find Gates to be refreshingly honest. I felt this way about his other book, *Duty*, as well. Gates discusses his failures at length in both books but as *A Passion for Leadership* is more self-improvement than the memoir, Gates talks about how to avoid his mistakes. *Passion* goes through Gates' own career to offer examples and anecdotes upon which he elaborates and details the things that worked or could have worked better.

While discussing what he thinks leaders should do in certain situations, Gates ALWAYS refers to fictional leader with the pronoun "she". This is no small or inconsequential decision. I read a lot for work. Most of that reading is recommended by the Chief of Staff of the Army. This book is on that list. Additionally, Gates is a former Secretary of Defense for presidents of both parties. I can not recall a single book on leadership that I have read that used female pronouns for the bosses and supervisors in examples. While I look forward to the day that I don't notice decisions like this, I think that now and especially in today's Army, this is kind of a big deal and just reaffirms my opinion of Robert Gates. I hope we have more people like him representing us.

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### **Joy says**

This was really a 2, but I rounded up to 3 because we need more books to be written about public service. In this case, the tone was off-putting and the content really wasn't very revolutionary. (I realized how much of a bureaucrat I am, by the fact that very few of his ideas were new to me, and none of them phased me.) Ultimately, this was like reading a 200-page resume, but I wanted to gain a much more genuine picture of the person and what they learned from successes \*and\* failures. Disappointing.

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