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INST 300
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“Having the capacity to lead is not enough. The leader must be willing to use it,” declared Vince Lombardi, a legendary football and business coach (Lombardi 19). Whether in school, the gym, or the office, leaders are essential to the success of any team. By analyzing the leadership of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and by comparing it to the leadership of Antigone, we can not only learn leadership lessons for our own lives, but furthermore, we can learn when Okonkwo fails as a leader.

First, I would like to analyze Okonkwo’s leadership. Early in the novel, we learn that Okonkwo desires to work very hard because he is “ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father (...) had loved. One of those things was (...) idleness” (Achebe 13). Certainly, hard work always seems to make a good foundation for leadership. Even Vince Lombardi agrees when saying “The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender” (Lombardi 20).

Okonkwo fulfills Lombardi’s statement when he is forced out of the tribe and has to spend 7 years in exile with his mother’s tribe Mbanta. Despite suffering a huge social and financial loss, Okonkwo keeps on farming though “work no longer ha[s] for him the pleasure it used to have” (Achebe 131). Still he clings to his life’s dream “to become one of the lords of the clan” (Achebe 131). Perseverance is certainly one of Okonkwo’s virtues. As Lombardi says, “it’s not whether you get knocked down, it’s whether you get up” (Lombardi 12). Despite “regrett[ing] every day of his exile”, Okonkwo always gets

up and keeps working hard. (Achebe 162) His hard-working trait is certainly a reason for others to look up to and admire him.

At the end of his 7-year exile, we can see that Okonkwo assumes a new style of leadership. So far, he has mostly been 'leading himself' by growing economically and socially. But in his last year in exile in Mbanta, Okonkwo throws a feast for his fellow kinsmen to "thank my mother's kinsmen before I go," he said,"(Achebe 163). He shows us a side we have seldom seen before. At the beginning of the feast, Okonkwo affirms that "it is not to pay you back for all you did for me in these seven years. (...) I have only called you together because it is good for kinsmen to meet" (Achebe 166). This is an interesting step in Okonkwo's development since he is now socially concerned. Okonkwo not only leads his own destiny, but he has become active in the tribe's destiny.

This side of Okonkwo grows even further when he gets back to his home tribe. Out of concern for his tribe, he wishes to destroy the missionary church. "He had spoken violently to his clansmen (...) and they had listened to him with respect" (Achebe 192). Okonkwo's leadership reaches its high point when messengers arrive to stop the tribal meeting. Reaching the climax of the Christian and tribal relationships, "Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body" (Achebe 204). In my opinion, this is Okonkwo leadership at its best. Following his values, his personality, and his calling, he does what he feels is best for the tribe regardless of the consequences.

In *Anatomy of a Leader*, Carl Mays describes this kind of responsibility-taking as essential for a leader. "Although problems may arise which discourage ambitions, a leader does not sit on the sidelines and hope that someone else will assume authority or

resolve the situation. When a major decision must be made, the outstanding individual does not try to pass the buck” (Mays 19). Indeed, this not only sounds like Okonkwo, but also very much like Antigone as well.

After Antigone’s brother Polynices had been killed, King Creon decided that his body was not to be buried. Following her values, her personality, and her calling, she does what she feels is best for her brother and buries him. “But if he dared,” she says, “to leave [my brother] unburied, that would have been real pain. [The consequences] are not” (Sophocles 178). Just like Okonkwo, Antigone feels compelled to go through with her actions regardless of the consequences. Antigone will not sit, wait, and whine, and neither did Okonkwo. For Okonkwo, killing an enemy is brave, manly, and justified – nothing to feel ashamed about. Antigone says likewise to Creon: “There is nothing shameful in honoring my brother” (Sophocles 180).

Unlike Okonkwo, Antigone stood up for her values from the very beginning. As Mays said, for a leader “it is important to believe in what you are doing and to know who you are” (Mays 9). In contrast, Okonkwo may have always lived by his values, but he did not stand up for them until close to the end. Instead, we can see him struggling to live in a society whose values are drifting further and further away from Okonkwo’s own treasured values of manly bravery and warfare.

While both Antigone and Okonkwo firmly believed in their values, Okonkwo seems less enthusiastic about the values he holds dear. He upholds force and masculinity throughout the book, but instead of celebrating his values, he too often criticizes femininity and peace. But, enthusiasm, not criticism, is vital to any leadership position. As Mays points out: “there is nothing quite like enthusiasm, no matter what you are

doing. It creates a sense of anticipation, optimism, and even fun. (...) This enthusiasm is impressive, as well as contagious, and can create momentum” (Mays 30). Or as Lombardi puts it: “If you aren’t fired with enthusiasm, you’ll be fired with enthusiasm” (Lombardi 4). Antigone, as we know, is all-fired up with enthusiasm. When her sister Ismene vows to keep Antigone’s actions a secret, Antigone cries out: “Oh, oh, no! I will hate you still worse for silence – should you not proclaim it to everyone” (Sophocles 164). She was so enthusiastic about her actions that she wanted the world to know – despite the fact that she was breaking the law.

At the very end, we can see why Okonkwo fails as a leader. Through the ups and downs of his struggles, he has lost his perseverance. On the importance of perseverance in leadership, Mays instructs us that a leader has to “confront adversity with confidence and persistence, without ever considering the possibility of failure. Certain individuals are able to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds rather than yielding to them. They become role models for anyone who has the motivation and need to achieve exceptional goals” (Mays 8). Whereas Antigone stood up and inspired others such as her sister and Haemon, Okonkwo left no followers behind. In his ailing tribe, Okonkwo’s masculinity, power, and spirit for war might have rescued his tribe. But he fails to rally his friends and tribal members and hangs himself instead. Thus, leaving a bitter message of defeat to those who might have dared to fight alongside with him.

When looking back on the leadership of Okonkwo and Antigone, I see two characters determined to stand up for their values. Antigone may have suffered the more severe consequences for her actions, but I still find her the better leader. “It is essential to understand that battles are primarily won in the hearts of men,” Vince Lombardi says. It

seems that Antigone's sensitive and feminine heart was strong and powerful enough to fight her battles, whereas Okonkwo's masculine and cold heart became two sizes too small to fight.

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