COLUMBIA BUSINESS SCHOOL

Leadership through Fiction

(B8541-001)

“Books that speak like God speak with too much authority to entertain us. Those that speak like good men hold us by their human charm; we grow by finding ourselves in them. They teach us to know ourselves better by recognizing ourselves in others.”

Thomas Merton
Thoughts in Solitude
Columbia College 1938 MA 1939

Scheduling Note: The first Fall-term 2013 class will be held on Friday, September 6th at 333 Uris Hall from 5:45 pm to 9:00 pm. After the first week, classes will return to the scheduled time-slot of 5:45 pm to 9:00 pm on Wednesdays.

Instructor: Bruce Craven
Email: bhc1@columbia.edu
Phone/Text: 818-681-9517

TA: Jonathan Emmett
Email: JEmmett14@gsb.columbia.edu

Office Hours: By Appointment
Location: Uris 333 (Capacity 50 students)
Time: Wednesdays- 5:45-9:00 pm
COURSE GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

Leadership through Fiction uses narrative fiction --primarily novels --and some selections of non-fiction as the foundation of the course. The novels are building blocks to personal introspection that is linked with leadership skill building. Each reading assignment and the related exercises for that week’s session will be a step towards the final exercise of creating and delivering a unique, authentic Leadership Credo: a message about what you stand for as a leader, based on what is important to you as an individual and what you will offer as a leader to those who choose to follow you. The Leadership Credo is one of many important tools that will be introduced to you in this course, for the purpose of offering you a hands-on form of development that will fit and be comfortable for you, natural to your personality and aligned with your core beliefs.

This course will develop your effectiveness at leadership, both in the workplace and your personal life. As a business leader, your vision and goals will continually intersect with challenge and conflict, presenting you with difficult decisions, forcing you to react in hazy, unclear and complicated environments. We call this hazy, unclear, complicated environment the white-water world. This was the metaphorical description of CBS Professor Ralph Biggadike, a term aimed at capturing the challenge in leadership where access to data and training in specific functional excellence will be necessary, but not sufficient to achieve success; where leadership requires extracting productive decisions from team-members, while managing ones’ self to maximize opportunities and avoid risks in periods of undetermined context and increasing pressure. In the white-water world the rapids are a fast-paced, overwhelming and murky river where submerged rocks wait, as you attempt to navigate successfully past the danger. Moving forward in your careers, you will inevitably face situations where you are operating in a white-water world, where success depends on guiding yourself and your organizations through complex and, unclear, challenges. In these situations, the wrong choices will have a serious impact on your future, as well as the future of your team: direct reports, colleagues, senior leaders and organization. In Leadership through Fiction, your primary instrument for preparing to manage the unpredictable and dangerous challenges in your future will be through reading and reflecting on narrative fiction, drawing out insights and lessons based on the struggles of the fictional characters, using the combined insights and experience of your classmates, combined with exercises in skill-development to prepare you for successful leadership when faced with the unpredictable.

Leadership through Fiction will require you to analyze and evaluate the choices of the characters that operate in each of the assigned narratives, with the intent of identifying precise moments where the characters made successful choices, as well as identify alternatives to questionable decisions and, often, ineffective behavior and negative results. You will work to articulate what could have contributed to the characters achieving their long-term strategic goals...what were they doing right? What could they have done more of under pressure? What was available to them that they didn’t choose or understand how to access? Most importantly, what can you as a leader do when faced with comparable challenges?

The course is founded on the belief that a combination of empathy, critical analysis and creative introspection, complimented by class experience leveraged through discussion, offers us a chance to
experience the fictional narratives in a cognitive, emotional and visceral way, learning from the journey of each character, and applying that learning in our own journey in order to benefit from the combined class insights and avoid costly mistakes, preparing ourselves to achieve our goals.

The teaching methodology will require you to prepare for each class by thoughtfully completing the assigned reading and responding to a short (roughly 150 word) focus question via email. In class, we will discuss the novel, focus on a core theme or themes and link these themes with skill development relevant to leadership in a business environment.

All the narratives assigned will be works written originally in English. The novels will range from roughly 200 to 350 pages in length. The novels have been selected for their “readability” and, while they require a commitment in time and concentration, our expectation is that you will find the process insightful, energizing and very often, entertaining. Each work will be unique in prose style, narrative structure, and thematic intent.

The novels are not explicitly placed in traditional business environments, although the characters are very often involved in pursuing goals related to their given professions. All of the assigned texts include dramatic conflict, presenting the reader with characters yearning for specific achievements or pursuing goals they perceive as critical to their happiness, fulfillment and professional success.

In the narratives chosen for this course, many of the characters make difficult decisions under pressure. It is exactly in this territory of pressured decision-making that career-making and career-ending events will occur. Consider each narrative as a lens to help you sharpen your view of yourself as a leader: what are your strengths and what are the areas in need of further development?

**COURSE FORMAT**

You will be asked to participate actively in class discussions and exercises. I expect each student to contribute ideas in our search for clarity on what the narratives can teach us. Class-time will be a balance of individual reflection, group discussion and interactive work on applicable leadership skills.

For example: one week the assignment will be Budd Schulberg’s classic novel, published in 1941, about Hollywood, titled *What Makes Sammy Run?* This novel follows an ambitious young man, Sammy Glick, from New York’s Lower East Side. Through the eyes of a colleague, first in the newspaper business and then as a screenwriter and producer of feature films, we will follow Sammy as he climbs the professional ladder. Sammy will make a number of decisions, as do the other characters in the novel. We will discuss these decisions, while focusing on the theme of *ambition*, working to gain clarity on how we will define and pursue ambition in our own professions, as well as the impact of ambition on our personal lives.

After discussing the novel, we will build on our insights from the reading by practicing the skill of peer-to-peer coaching; a form of *executive coaching*, this is an opportunity available to help one develop one’s skill regarding self-knowledge and clarity of action; it is also a skill one can offer or provide to help
others gain similar knowledge and perspective on taking action. In other words, the traditional model of a professional coach working with an executive can be adjusted to fit situations where peers coach each other, serving to help the coachee work his and her way to key solutions.

**COURSE NORMS AND ASSIGNMENTS**

**Focus Questions:** This is a course that requires the participation of each student in class discussion, as well as individual and group exercises. You are expected to complete the weekly reading and respond to each week’s focus question via email. This will be 30% of the final grade. You will receive a rating of +2, +1 or 0 based on your weekly response to the focus question. My T.A. will provide you with the guidelines on submitting the answers to the focus questions. In most cases, the deadline will be 8:00 am the morning of the class. I don’t expect you to achieve a pre-ordained answer, but rather to read the work with curiosity and search for interesting ideas as you answer the questions; with a focus on understanding the work and preparing for the week’s class. This course is about gaining the ability to operate effectively when the answers are not black or white, thus your responses to the focus questions should be honest attempts to think introspectively, as well as articulate your thoughts on the subject with clarity and search for relevant insights. A +1 grade means you have successfully accomplished the task and have offered an answer that is clear, interesting and relevant. A +2 will show a particularly unique, insightful or elegant answer. (We don’t expect you to reach for +2, but answer with succinct introspective honesty; a +1 means task accomplished.) A 0 will be the result of failing to answer the question or answering in such a banal manner that your effort is suspect. My T.A. and I will provide you with examples of how we will grade these as the class progresses, so you will understand the process.

**Class Participation:** You are also expected to contribute in class and support the overall learning of yourself and your classmates through positive, encouraging and honest class participation. This will constitute 40% of your final grade. Again, this is not about achieving the perfect, approved response, but rather contributing with the class on reflection and searching for insights that will help you down the road. Your success at class participation will be positively impacted by thoughtfully completing the required readings. If you bring a curious, engaged attitude to class, your contribution to your learning and the overall learning of the class will strong and noticeable over the length of the course.

**Learning Journal:** we will ask you to keep a journal through the ten weeks of the course. The expectation is that you will work on this journal during class in particular on questions that will be provided during class time; also you will be encouraged to capture other related reflections outside of class in the journal. Your journal will be a unique and personal instrument for your individual leadership development. With the assistance of my T.A., we will review these journals mid-way through the course, giving you the +3 +2 +1 0 rating on your efforts at capturing the learning. (Again, trust your instincts and engage with creating a journal that will be an on-going resource for you post-program; more words on the page are not the ideal; in fact, distilling the learning into useful notes, phrases, concepts and action-steps that relate to your development is the goal.) At the end of the course, we will review the journals one final time. We will not scour your journal to critique the ideas presented, but rather review it to get a sense of your effort and commitment to make each session applicable to your own leadership development.)
Reflection is critical because this is the time where you work within your own individual experience to take the learning from the class and abstract, summarize and translate the ideas into a distilled, personalized format that is useful to you going forward. You will be encouraged to capture the ideas in whatever way is relevant and useful for you. We are all unique individuals and the journal should reflect your specific approach to engaging with the ideas of the course and capturing the learning. The Learning Journal will be the final 30% of your grade. You will be provided with guidelines to create an action-plan on how you will go forward with the insights from the course.

Final Grade Summary:

Focus Questions: 30%
Class Participation: 40%
Learning Journal: 30%

COURSE OVERVIEW

This is the basic structure of the course through the ten weeks.

Session #1
Session Title: Your Freedom
Theme: Player versus Victim
Required Reading: The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave
Exercise: “Writing Your Hero’s Journey”

Session #2
Session Title: Your Decision-Making
Theme: Creating Options
Required Reading: Revolutionary Road written by Richard Yates
Exercise: “Flip the Script on Options & Good Luck”

Session #3
Session Title: Your Actions
Theme: Managing the Risk of Derailment
Required Reading: How to Be Good written by Nick Hornby
Exercise: “Identifying Your Crucible”

Session #4
Session Title: Your Learning & Communications Preferences
Theme: Maximizing the Ability to Communicate and Learn
Required Reading: None – Complete Pre-Session Questionnaire
Exercise: “HBDI Diagnostic”

Session #5
Session Title: Your Ambition
Theme: Leading Your Ambition
Required Reading: What Makes Sammy Run? written by Budd Schulberg, Jr.
Exercise: “Coaching Ambition”
Session #6
Session Title: Your External Environment
Theme: Mastering Context
Required Reading: Devil in a Blue Dress written by Walter Mosley
Exercise: “Improving Contextual Intelligence”

Mid-Term Break: Read True West and begin novel Little Big Man

Session #7
Session Title: Your History
Theme: Our Past Experiences as Leadership Resource
Required Reading: True West written by Sam Shepard
Exercise: “Lifeline Workshop”

Session #8
Session Title: Your Performance
Theme: Leading Yourself and Others
Required Viewing: Self-Selected Viewing of Narrative Fiction in Film or Television
Exercise: “The Visual Fiction Project” & “Leadership Styles”

Session #9
Session Title: Your Adventure, Your Resilience
Theme: Adventures & Resilience
Required Reading: Little Big Man written by Thomas Berger, Sweet Ride written by Bruce Craven (optional)
Exercise: “Building Clarity on Purpose and Resilience”

Session #10
Session Title: Your Community
Theme: Leading Under Pressure
Required Reading: The Descendants written by Kaui Hart Hemmings
Exercise: “Leadership Values”

Session #11
Session Title: Your Followers
Theme: Leadership Credos
Required Reading: When the Killing is Done written by T.C. Boyle
Exercise: “Leadership Credo Presentations”

Session #12
Session Title: Your Purpose, Your Career
Theme: Defining Purpose, Navigating Career Stress
Required Reading: The Player written by Michael Tolkien (TBC)
NOTE: This syllabus is subject to change, depending on the requirements of delivering the material and possible adjustments to the content and presentations over the course of the class.

END OF SYLLABUS: Fall Term 2013, Bruce Craven

Adjusted July 4, 2013