Oprah Winfrey, A Visionary, A Leader

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Business Highlights & Challenges

Oprah Gail Winfrey, 59, is a self-made business leader and visionary who is known worldwide. From a childhood of adversities, she transformed herself from a lost child into a beautifully rounded woman who has held the titles of “film actress, philanthropist, talk show host, and television producer” (Oprah Winfrey Biography, 2011) at one time or another; and some simultaneously.

After a turbulent childhood of sexual child abuse while living with her mother, Oprah moved to Nashville, Tennessee with her father and enrolled at Tennessee State University. She was offered a part-time cameo position on a local television show and during this time, she also work in radio. (Oprah Winfrey Biography, 2011)

As Winfrey was gaining experience in the world of entertaining and informative broadcasting, she realized she overcame many adversities in her childhood, some of which were drugs and a teenage pregnancy. Her early childhood and those hardships had a great impact on who she is today as a businesswoman and an accomplished leader in many fields.

Most of Oprah’s career has been in television where she has hosted several talk shows that were aired worldwide. Her career in television started in Baltimore, Maryland and landed in Chicago, Illinois where she works and lives today.

Her talk shows portrayed her warm-hearted, sincere, and sensitive side with her guests and their stories. In time, Oprah would share her personal trials and tribulations, such as her weight gain and loss and her troubled childhood with those who invited her into their home every day, only making her more exposed as a real human who has her own stories to tell. Over time, Oprah became a household name and eventually became one of the top rated daytime shows in
history; and at one point, she had a larger viewing audience than her timeslot rival, Phil Donahue.

Undeniably, Oprah’s most successful career move was the Oprah Winfrey Show, which first aired in 1986 and broadcasted its last show in 2011; twenty-five years of splendid, informative, entertaining, and captivating television programming. During the 25-year’s that the Oprah Winfrey Show as on the air, and through turbulent times when other daytime talk shows were becoming “increasingly trashy and exploitative, Winfrey pledged to keep her show free of tabloid topics.” (Oprah Winfrey Biography, 2011)

During the quarter century hosting the Oprah Winfrey Show, Oprah’s career interests span the spectrum and being the keen businesswoman and visionary she has grown to be, Winfrey expanded the Oprah brand by founding, and launching her “O Magazine” in 2000.

In addition to her talk show career, Oprah has: 1) produced and starred in movies where were produced by her production company called HARPO (Oprah spelled backwards) Productions; 2) she founded and personally funded schools in South Africa for impoverished girls so they have an education that will give them a foundation for their futures; and 3) Oprah founded a network on cable television called OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) which is the pinnacle of her career.

Some of the business challenges Oprah has faced during her career are:

1) Being the first black female to own her own television show and being one-hundred percent responsible for the success or failure of the show. She overcame this obstacle by having drive and ambition to succeed. She is true to her beliefs and what she feels is her purpose in life.

2) Another challenge or weakness Oprah acknowledges possessing is confrontation and is reportedly stated, “avoiding confrontation is a weakness. So I have to shore myself up with
people who can be confrontational. I’m also not good at the great idea; I’m good at building on the great idea.” (US News, 2005)

3) When Oprah decided to end her hugely successful daytime talk show in order to launch OWN on cable television. As stated on Portfolio.com, “so far, the gamble hasn’t paid off, with rating slow to grow. But now Oprah is taking the reins herself, stepping into the corner office as CEO.” (Bernhard, Jr., 2011) Oprah has displayed the true signs of leadership by taking the necessary measures to do all she can to overcome adversities and the possibility that her recent endeavor may not be as successful as once believed.

**Leadership Style & Cultural Adaption**

Being a black woman in a white man’s world, Oprah has taken the bull by the horns, per se, and successfully demonstrated her determination, knowledge, and tenacity that she is an intelligent and focused business woman. She has adapted to the white man’s world by building a talented team and surrounding herself with brilliant business partners who have the knowledge and influence to help her build the Oprah Empire.

Winfrey’s leadership style is one that affords her the opportunity to break out of her comfort zone and explore new, exciting, and lucrative business opportunities. (Black Enterprise Business, 2008) She leads by example and has the confidence that if you believe you can achieve it, you can; and the only failure is when you fail to take chances and believe in your own abilities.

Oprah “Doesn’t make business decisions purely on the basis of profit. She develops partnerships and ventures on instinct and utility.” (Black Enterprise Business, 2008) Winfrey is candid about her mistakes and surrounds herself with those who have the expertise needed in directing any project, task, or venture on a path toward success.
Leadership Management & Methods

Ms. Winfrey’s leadership management style is one that places value on those who work with her. Every employee and business partner personally feels Oprah’s gratitude and admiration for him or her and discerns those feeling are genuinely placed. There have been times in Winfrey’s career where she needed to accept that she cannot do it all herself and acknowledges the importance of her team members and the expertise they add to her company.

Winfrey operates her businesses with a leadership practice that can be summed up in ten steps. Those steps are listed on the Forbes website as:

1) she recognizes she cannot build an empire alone and carefully selects her team who can add value and results for her visions; 2) she builds relationships with mentors in the industry; 3) she understands the value of her viewers, readers, and customers, she listens to them and makes them an important part of her business; 4) Oprah is a visionary and has demonstrated that trait by extending her brand in other markets; 5) she keeps her brand focused on her core audiences; 6) she rewards her employees and personally selects Christmas gifts for each, which in turn makes them fully realize the value Winfrey holds for them in her businesses; 7) Winfrey believes in living the dream and shares her confidence with staff and business partners that with hard work, dreams can come true; 8) she communicates her vision for her company and brands to those who are actively involved in projects; 9) as a solid leader, Winfrey demonstrates social conscience to the community and openly applauds values of self-improvement, positivity, and charity; and, 10) through it all, Winfrey remains resilient by continually demonstrating ambition, drive, and focus.

(Goudreau, Oprah's Best Leadership Practices, 2010) (Oprah Winfrey Biography, 2011)
Visionary Impact

Oprah Winfrey’s visions have greatly influenced many industries (i.e., radio, television, print, and humanitarian efforts) and touched countless lives in a positive and empowering manner. Her visions have led to several very successful talk shows; some that offered free assistance to viewers in need of weight-loss management, improvement in home or social life, and an understanding that people do not need to settle for what life deals them, they can make positive changes in their lives, on their own. Through Oprah’s efforts, her viewers and readers have taken deeper interests in humanitarian efforts, and realized they can and do make a difference; they just need to make the effort.

In addition to Oprah’s television shows, she is a philanthropist and “believes education is the door to freedom.” (Oprah, 2011). Through her Oprah’s Angel Network, she has raised millions of dollars, many times over, for charitable programs. (Oprah Winfrey Biography, 2011) Yes, Ms. Winfrey is quite the visionary and through her sometimes seemingly far-reaching visions and desires, she was been instrumental in helping others achieve a better life for themselves or to find a way to add value to the lives of those she has contact. From her talk shows to impoverished South African girls, Oprah’s visions have made a significant difference that touches every corner of the world.
Resources


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