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WHAT'S A LEADERSHIP BOOK, ANYWAY?

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What's a Leadership Book, Anyway?

By James O'Toole

Nearly every author alive who has written a significant book on leadership gathered recently at Harvard's Kennedy School to celebrate the career of the patriarch of their field, the redoubtable eighty-one year-old Warren Bennis. The emcee of the event estimated that the total number of books sold by those in the room was, even after deducting remainders, some thirty million. As might be expected from such celebrities, when they each rose to speak they said more about themselves than they did about the honoree. More surprisingly, they also didn't say much about the subjects traditionally found in leadership books: the styles, traits, and practices of the masters of the art. Instead, the gurus' comments touched, variously, on history, politics, philosophy, poetry, economics, technology, psychology, science, ethics, education, and culture. As they spoke, it became clear that each of the authors, in his or her own way, was seeking to understand the broader social context in which leadership occurs, and to clarify the complex, myriad, and unquantifiable ways leaders of modern institutions affect the lives of citizens, consumers, and workers. The sum of their comments amounted to a revelation: Without anyone having noticed, the field of leadership apparently had become the home base for business generalists and, in particular, the last bastion in academia of cross-disciplinary thought and teaching.

La Creme de la Creme

In hindsight, that shift in focus away from the narrow "how-to" and toward the broader "why" of leadership has been reflected in the books reviewed in S+B in recent

years: For the most part, the best books selected in the field of leadership haven't been "leadership books" at all. And the books atop this year's list confirm the trend. *Newsweek* columnist Jonathan Alter's *The Defining Moment* is a concise and insightful journalistic account of the first hundred days of Franklin D. Roosevelt's initial term in office. Without listing FDR's ten leadership secrets, Alter provides invaluable lessons for executives seeking to change their organizations (aren't they all?). Readers who make a little effort at translation from the world of politics to the world of business will find that the book shows how, by relying more on persuasion than power, a determined leader can bring about profound change in a short period of time.

Alter reminds us how close America came in 1933 to succumbing to the totalitarianism then sweeping the world. As unemployment stood at 25%, business investment all but having disappeared, and many of the nation's banks defaulting, such influential figures as William Randolph Hearst and Walter Lippmann were calling for FDR to assume "dictatorial powers" to quell the simmering political unrest that promised to boil over into rebellion. Roosevelt ignored the pleas to centralize power and, instead, used his impressive leadership skills to prod, cajole, connive, and charm Congress into quickly passing the most far-reaching array of social legislation in the nation's history, including the CCC, NRA, TVA, and forerunners of the FDIC and SEC. Under his leadership, America was treated to an alphabet soup of programs and agencies designed to offer fast relief to its most distressed citizens, and a sense of long-term security to the rest of the populous.

Alas, these programs did not effectively address the Depression—that had to await the enormous defense build-up prior to America's entry into World War II—but, as

Alter convincingly argues, overcoming the nation's financial woes wasn't FDR's central task. Far more important, Roosevelt restored faith in the system, thus probably saving American democracy and capitalism. At his inauguration, a visitor had commented to FDR that he would go down as the worst U.S. President in history if his legislative program failed. "If it fails," Roosevelt replied, "I'll be the *last* one."

Alter offers a balanced account of Roosevelt's strengths and weakness. No hagiography, the book documents FDR was far from being a nice guy. Vain and insincere, he resorted to Machiavellian dissembling (his character shortcomings make for embarrassing reading even in our less judgmental era.) He also wasn't the smartest, or best educated, man to occupy the Oval Office, intellectually inferior to both his hero, Jefferson, and his beloved distant cousin, Theodore. But FDR understood his own weaknesses, and was willing to compensate for them. First, he learned from, and then avoided making, the same mistakes as his contemporaries Herbert Hoover and Al Smith; second, he surrounded himself with a strong personal staff and an impressive "brain trust" who developed his administration's policies and ran the departments of government (his modus operandi was to listen to the opposing arguments of these experts and then to take the best as his own). He also learned from his own numerous errors (for example, he couldn't see how deposit insurance would help restore trust in the banking system). Instead of being driven by ideology he had a "bias for action," an unnatural willingness to experiment, and then abandon his own brilliant, but demonstrably failed, ideas.

Roosevelt understood that he was neither the boss nor savior of the American people but, rather, "the present instrument" of their wishes whose role it was to help them

do what they could not do for themselves. In this, he had the perfect co-leader, his wife Eleanor. He once said that he focused on what *could* be done, and she focused on what *should* be done. Today, we can appreciate the value of this double-barreled approach as our leaders in both the public and private sectors seem concerned only with what *is*.

Not surprisingly, journalist Alter focuses on FDR's masterly use of the mass media. Roosevelt's "talent for useful simplification" allowed him to put his radio "fireside chats" to the greatest effect, reaching into the homes of common Americans with a "personal" touch, and thus generating broad public support for his agenda. Business people can benefit from the speeches included in Alter's book, noting how FDR created "burning platforms" to get the attention of the citizenry, then quickly offered them the "hope and redemption" of his policies. Leaders of all organizations can draw useful lessons from FDR's experiences with regard to such practical tasks as managing during a crisis, dealing with transitions (his predecessor, Hoover, tried to sabotage the handoff of the Presidential baton), and overcoming the resistance of powerful interests groups (both business and unions opposed large parts of the New Deal). Of course, Alter doesn't spell out these leadership lessons with a handy list of how-to's; instead, he offers rich detail about the complex world decision makers actually inhabit, complete with the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent to occupying an executive suite.

Unlike many journalists venturing into biography, Alter doesn't try to pass himself off as a professional historian. With the exception of some annoying psychologizing about FDR's relationship to his mother, the author modestly sticks to what he knows how to do so well: writing punchy, magazine-length chapters, each making a single, clear point. Business readers will appreciate that. But he also

acknowledges a broader philosophical question raised by his portrait of FDR: it is squarely in the tradition of The Great Man school of leadership. He admits that this orientation is as unfashionable as it is problematic.

In this regard, Alter's book is the flip side of—and perfect companion to—British literary critic Lucy Hughes-Hallett's *Heroes*, an elegant historical and literary analysis of eight individuals (one fictional) who inspired unbridled hero-worship from Ancient Greece to modern Europe. To her credit, Hughes-Hallett doesn't round up the usual suspects. Instead of Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, and the other bigger-than-life heroes dubbed Great Men by Thomas Carlyle (and Supermen by Friedrich Nietzsche) in the nineteenth century, she chooses the tales of slightly lesser-known figures who, rather than being fearsome conquerors, were seen as saviors by the masses of their times. Cato, El Cid, Francis Drake, Garibaldi and the other personalities she profiles were complex characters who each gave great service to their people but, and here is the point of her story, that service came at a high price.

It turns out that heroes are difficult to live with. They single-mindedly succeed at their tasks because they are self-confident and have no quit in them--which also means they tend to be self-centered, unyielding, obsessive, arrogant, and unwilling to bend to anyone's rules. Such uncompromising men (Hughes-Hallett says women seldom have been seen as heroes) are particularly useful *if* the task is protecting a constitution (Cato), fighting foreign invaders (El Cid), sinking an armada (Drake), or securing national independence (Garibaldi), but in all other ways and times they are royal pains in the neck. The incorruptible Cato fought valiantly against Julius Caesar's attempts to become all-powerful emperor of republican Rome, but he also was unfeeling ("he expressed regret

that he had been so weak as to have kissed his wife”), austere and self-righteous (he practiced “the theatre of poverty, a humble act with a proud subtext”), and pugnacious (one biographer observed that Cato was always ready to throw himself into the breach, whether or not it was necessary to do so). El Cid kicked the pants off the invading Moors, but he also was a mercenary adventurer who “rode out, high on adrenaline and self-love,” a man capable of extreme violence and cruelty even against his fellow Christians. Francis Drake saved the day for Elizabeth I when he scuttled the Spanish fleet, but he was first and foremost an amoral pirate who, at the point of defeating the Armada, abandoned the patriotic cause to capture a disabled ship for his own booty. And Garibaldi deserves as much credit as anyone for having united Italy but, at base, he was an extremely lucky egotist who didn’t have the sense to know when to stop fighting. In the end, Hughes-Hallett’s heroes all came-a-cropper. As Emerson noted, “Every hero becomes a bore at last.”

Hughes-Hallett’s subtitle is “a study of hero worship.” The question she explores is not why men want to be heroes (the answer: it’s fun to be the loose canon in a crowd of conformists); instead, what intrigues the author is why we not only tolerate heroes, we actually seek them out. Since hero worship is manifestly the first step toward totalitarianism, this is high-risk behavior on our part. Even when the careers of heroes are nipped in the bud before they have absconded with our freedoms, their activities drain us of our power. Emerson said that “life is sweet and tolerable only in our belief in great men,” but he added that a hero is a “monopolizer and usurper of others’ minds,” and hero worshipers run the risk of “intellectual suicides.” That is why the Athenians had the sense to ostracize any leader who showed heroic tendencies. That may not have been the most

efficient way to govern, but it was deemed healthier for the people to learn to govern themselves.

Yet, we never seem to learn. Hughes-Hallett notes that, on September 12, 2001, a group of people were photographed at the ruins of the World Trade Center under the banner “We Need Heroes Now.” Indeed, modern America lacks swashbuckling supermen capable of making things right with their mighty swords. Instead, in both the public and private sectors, we have celebrity leaders: essentially, heroes without the beef. In the corporate world over the last decade, former- CEOs Dennis Kozlowski, Ken Lay, Phil Condit, Al Dunlap, and Jack Welch each had his day featured, uncritically, as the next Great Man on the cover of one or another national business magazine. For various and different reasons, all those would-be supermen turned out to have had feet of clay. Perhaps now we are ready to accept a truth that Bertolt Brecht once proclaimed in a Europe gone mad with dictatorship: it is an unhappy land that needs to search for heroes.

Granted, it takes a bit of imagination to see the connection between the historical heroes Hughes-Hallett portrays and the celebrity CEOs who are of interest to readers of business books, but that mind-stretch is well worth the effort. It is instructive to learn that Garibaldi practiced Jeff Skilling-like sleight of hand, and that he tried to compensate for his lack of managerial skill with displays of bravura comparable to those of such famous entrepreneurs as Billy Durant, Howard Hughes, and Donald Trump. In exploring the historical details, we learn why such practices didn’t work for Garibaldi then and, by extension, why they don’t work in the business arena now. And by considering Alter’s and Hughes-Hallett’s books as companions, it is useful for us to give hard thought to identifying what distinguishes the leadership of a Franklin Roosevelt, on the one hand,

from that of a Garibaldi, on the other. Personally, I found the challenge of trying to sort through the distinction between healthy and unhealthy dependence on a leader to be an extremely difficult mental exercise--particularly in the context of business where political freedoms aren't at risk

The Year's Most Unusual Offerings

The problematic challenges raised by great businessmen are explored in a third new book, Nikos Mourkogiannis' *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies*. This is surely the least-traditional leadership volume of the year, if not the oddest. Part personal memoir, part advertisement for the author's London-based consulting firm, part business history, part philosophic text, part ethics sermon, and part annotated graduate-student bibliography, it might appear that Mourkogiannis's book is the perfect illustration of the new multi-disciplinary trend in leadership books. Actually, he would have been well-served by a skilled editor who sharpened his focus. Nonetheless, this is an earnest effort with a moral message that deserves consideration: profit is an insufficient purpose for sustaining a business. Instead, the author claims there are four legitimate business purposes: Discovery, Excellence, Altruism, and Heroism.

While I can't say I was convinced by the way he arrives at his conclusions, he surely is spot-on in identifying Henry Ford as the avatar of heroic business leadership. If any businessman ever was, Ford was a Great Man who engaged in "a single-minded effort to change the world" and succeeded. Exactly as Hughes-Hallett describes her heroes, Ford was an obsessive, outsized figure for whom the rules regulating the lives of other men didn't apply. He overcame all the obstacles—technological, financial, organizational—that had kept other business leaders from creating the revolution of mass

manufacturing that ultimately led to unimagined economies-of-scale in production, and subsequent low prices for consumers. What a genius! What a superman!

And what a pain old Henry was to everyone who worked for, or had to deal with, him. He was an autocratic boss and an egotistic business partner who would let no one stand in the way of the exertion of his mighty will. He castigated his colleagues and investors for seeing the Ford Motor Company as a mere “money making concern” rather than as “a vehicle for realizing my ideas.” A true Nietzschean *Übermensch*, he had his way with them all. But, in the end, they and he paid the price. Like all Great Men, Ford’s strengths were his flaws. The very single-mindedness (he famously said his customers could have any color of car they wanted, “as long as it is black”) that led to his success would be the cause of his undoing. While he was focused myopically on making his only product, the Model T, cheaper and cheaper still, across town at General Motors the far less-brilliant Alfred Sloan was creating a full line of cars in response to the changing demands of consumers.

Like most heroes, Ford was all “act” and no introspection. When a united Italy looked to Garibaldi for political leadership, he kept on doing his thing—fighting—long after that was what the country needed. And after Ford succeeded in realizing his magnificent dream, he kept producing Model Ts until he nearly bankrupted the Ford company and, at his death, left it so dependent on his leadership that it took decades for it to recover from his heroic legacy. The issue is the same today: what are organizations to do with bigger-than-life executives? In light of the historical experiences described in these three books, Bill Gates’ recent decision to stand down from the executive suite at

Microsoft and devote himself to philanthropy looks to this observer like enlightened leadership.

Mourkogainnis reminds managers that there is a rich lode of wisdom to be found in history books, and it is foolhardy for them to believe they can learn only from their own experiences which, by definition, are limited and circumscribed. Of course, lessons learned from others are difficult to interpret and to apply to our own situations. For example, although Mourkogainnis cites Ford and others to illustrate his thesis that profit is an insufficient purpose for a business, there is no evidence that Alfred Sloan and his organization men at GM who bested Heroic Henry ever had any purpose in mind other than to make a profit. Leadership is complicated, isn't it?

The Also-Ran's, Briefly Noted

Compared to the instructive complexities found in the three non-leadership cited above, most of this year's crop of conventional leadership manuals seem sterile and simplistic. But the quality of a few of those books is a cut above average and, depending on what the reader is looking for, they offer useful information and perspectives. The best of the rest is Sharon Daloz Parks's *Leadership Can Be Taught*. I approached this volume with ambivalence: I hold with the minority that leadership can be taught, but the use of an italicized word in a title is red flag warning that the author distrusts the reader's intelligence (like speakers who wiggle two fingers at their temples to make sure you "get it" that they are quoting). Thankfully, the book turns out to be an intelligent and thorough description of the teaching method noted scholar Ronald Heifetz employs at Harvard to teach leadership. Called "case-in-point"—to distinguish it from the traditional business case method—Heifetz's approach skillfully uses the dynamics in his classroom to

demonstrate his theory that leaders need to offer followers “adaptive challenges” instead of telling them what to do. It works (see Ancient Athens, above), but so do other classroom approaches, and that’s the book’s shortcoming. Maybe Park’s next book will pay more attention to the successful ways other fine professors teach leadership.

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones’ *Why Should Anyone Be Led by YOU* is another offering with an off-putting graphic element in its title. Fortunately, the fingering pointing on the cover doesn’t carry over to the text which is a useful, if uninspired, summary of the currently hot topic of leadership authenticity. In the prescribed mode of how-to books, the authors dutifully serve up the requisite seven chapters each with a separate useful lesson (“Take Personal Risks” “Communicate—with Care”). Who could disagree? Mark Gerzon’s *Leading Through Conflict* is a practical, authoritative text on another important subject garnering increasing attention: mediation. The human relations skills of the mediator are clearly useful in many, in not most, managerial situations, and consequently this book is useful. But the applicability of mediation to many aspects of leadership is limited: neither FDR nor Ford could have met the great challenges they overcame behaving like mediators.

Unfortunately, the most useful conventional, how-to leadership book of the year is technically ineligible for the honor: Warren Bennis and Robert Townsend’s *Reinventing Leadership* is a new edition of a book largely overlooked when it was originally published in 1995. OK, I admit that Bennis is my mentor and occasional co-author, and the late-Bob Townsend (the CEO who famously made Avis “Try Harder”) was my drinking buddy and fellow corporate board member, but I don’t think I’m entirely biased in saying that the two of them seasoned their practical advice about “what

leaders do to empower the organization” with more than a modicum of wit and profundity. And this paperback edition is cheap, too!

The Bottom of the Barrell

I could swear that some publishers use cookie cutters. *Bench Strength* by Robert Barner, Ph.D (an author’s academic credentials on the cover is a sure sign the book’s a loser) feels like it came off a business book assembly-line. Strategic talent management is obviously important, and book may be useful for managers who have never given the subject a moment’s thought. To show just how potentially useful it is, the author serves up, count ‘em, 7 “Principles,” 6 “Guidelines,” 5 “Steps,” and assorted other enumerated lists. But he ain’t got nuthin’ on Dr. Karen Otazo, whose *The Truth About Being a Leader* “reveals 52 proven leadership principles and bite-size, easy-to-use techniques that *really work*,” and all in a format that fits in your shirt pocket! In sooth, 52 truths (“Truth 15: Names Matter to People, So Get Them Right’) was more truthiness than I could handle.

Well, you get my drift: business people can learn more profound lessons about leadership from intellectually demanding books that are not practical, per se, than they can from the lightweight, easy-to-read, “how-to” textbooks that are staples of the leadership book genre. As a footnote, in July the *New York Times* reported that the nation’s most famous MBA, George W. Bush, had this to say in reference to the new Iraqi Prime Minister’s plan to pacify that county: “That’s what leaders do,” he explained “They see problems, they address problems, and they lay out a plan to solve the problems.” It’s as simple as one, two, three. Isn’t it?

Jonathan Alter, *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, Simon and Schuster 2006

Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Heroes: A History of Hero Worship*, Knopf, 2005

Mikos Mourkogiannis *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies*,
Palgrave-Macmillan 2006

Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught*, HBS Press, 2005

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, *Why Should Anyone Be Led by YOU?: What it Takes to Be an Authentic Leader*, HBS Press, 2006

Mark Gerzon, *Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences into Opportunities*, HBS Press, 2006

Warren G. Bennis and Robert Townsend, *Reinventing Leadership: Strategies to Empower the Organization*, Collins Business Essential, 2005

Robert Barner, Ph.D., *Bench Strength*, AMACOM, 2006

Dr. Karen Otazo, *The Truth About Being a Leader...And Nothing But the Truth*,
Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007