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Book Review of: Harvard Business Review's 10 must reads: On leadership

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BOOK REVIEW

Harvard Business Review's 10 Must Reads: On Leadership; Paperback, 240 pp., HBR Press: Jan, 2011 [1]

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It is eminently refreshing to have a prestigious and elite institution such as Harvard University take the trouble to sift through numerous articles of past *HBR* issues and come up with a compendium that comes across as both engaging and useful. The *HBR* Press has done this for a number of sub-disciplines of the field of Management, such as 'Strategy' and 'Change,' for example. However, 'Leadership' in view of the challenges it poses can claim the honor of being in a league of its own. The compendium, in spite of its relatively short length, manages to cover a staggering variety of topics ranging from styles of governance to traits including, but not limited to, empathy, perseverance, and dedication.

At risk of making this paragraph read like a rather unromantic laundry list I will briefly describe the gist of each article in the order in which they appear. Introducing the ten articles is a piece by Daniel Goleman which outlines five components of emotional intelligence that he believes are necessary for any leader to possess in order to excel: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Next comes an essay by Claremont professor Peter Drucker who holds the personal distinction of having authored nearly two dozen articles for the *HBR*. In 'What Makes an Effective Executive' Drucker underscores the point that in spite of exciting traits such as flamboyance and charisma, every major leader bases his or her governance on solid responsibility and diligence. Following this we have John Kotter's article that grapples with the fundamental question of where management ends and leadership begins, with Kotter expressing the belief that leaders invariably have to cope with change while managers may not need to do so. Then Ronald Heifetz and Donald Laurie dwell at length on the work underlying leadership; their article is very readable and contains an important case study on how Ruud Koedijk of KPMG, Netherlands transformed the structure of the company, updating it and adapting to change, thereby increasing business opportunities. This is followed by a risky and provocative piece by Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones on how leaders can make themselves more human and approachable by revealing a weakness or two; however, the writers are careful to stress that tough empathy on the part of a leader is preferable to excessive warmth!

Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas' essay on crucibles of leadership comes next. This is a genuinely interesting piece on how leaders use social adversity and challenges—even active discrimination directed against them—in order to develop fortitude, cultivate their image, and impress colleagues. 'Level Five Leadership' by Jim Collins follows in which the author painstakingly delineates the five hierarchical stages by means of which one proceeds towards leadership: Highly Capable Individual, Contributing Team member, Competent Manager, Effective Leader, and finally, Executive. In a similar vein, David Rooke and William Torbert delineate the diverse roles played by opportunists, diplomats, experts, achievers, individualists, strategists, and alchemists—the last, in their opinion, are the rarest, most desirable leaders since their 'alchemy' enables them to consistently reinvent themselves in order to cope with change. The volume closes with a couple of articles that each have multiple authors, one on authentic leadership which emphasizes that it is fruitless to try to

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[1] The review is of a recent reprint of the text

emulate leadership styles, and one called 'In Praise of the Incomplete Leader.' The latter essay notes that only by examining their own weaknesses can leaders hope to actualize their visions—indeed, assuming that one is unassailable leads to a dangerous and unproductive calcification of one's personality.

The articles, as is evident, cover a wide range of themes with almost all of them dwelling on how a leader needs to reach outside of himself or herself in order to become more aware as to what the organization needs and what its employers expect from senior management. Most of the articles date from the first decade of this millennium which might explain the compendium's modernist focus on empathy and creativity. However, while Nelson Mandela and South Africa are mentioned a few times (by more than one author) the collection is not really one with a major global or diverse focus. Just a couple of case studies of how leaders coped with gender discrimination amongst the Chinese and how one dealt with African-American work crises in Tennessee are included. While this is understandable given considerations of space, it is surprising that Middle Eastern and Asian business arenas and markets are almost never alluded to;hence the focus of most of the essays is predominantly North American/Western. One can conversely argue that *HBR* decided to create a deliberately abstract set of leadership principles by linking together the articles in this volume, since they could thereby apply to anyone at any time. Perhaps this explains the generally readable nature of the essays, in spite of—or perhaps because of—having been written by top-notch academics and executives they are accessible to young, upper-level undergraduates as readily as to individuals across the corporate spectrum.

What is most impressive about this compendium is how it subtly, but effectively, strips the concept of leadership of its outward trappings of glamour. Virtually all the authors imply that real power grows from being able to cope with adversity and problematic issues such as ill-health, bad luck, serious corporate mistakes, family tragedies, and even in one case, wrongful imprisonment! It would perhaps have been beneficial for one of the articles to have focused on legal issues in business and how those tend to impact leadership, but most of the authors appeared less interested in corporate or boardroom machinations and thus the collection veers more towards helping the reader appreciate an overarching *psychology* of leadership. At risk of sounding unfashionable, though, I should add that given that so many of the articles focus on postmodern leadership psychology, a single more 'classic' piece on the colder, harsher aspects of leadership, such as autocracy and corporate hegemony would have acted as a sound foil or oppositional counterpart to some of the others. Nevertheless, in aggregate, *HBR* is to be congratulated on having produced a book which is guaranteed to have a long shelf-life and hopefully touch the lives of many leaders, both potential and otherwise.

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