

LEADERSHIP BS: FIXING WORKPLACES AND CAREERS - ONE TRUTH AT A TIME¹

by Jeffrey Pfeffer

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Book Review

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This is a politically incorrect book, as it presents a provoking set of ideas about leadership which are designed to shock. Leadership is one of the most popular topics in Management and Social Sciences, and it is also one of the most profitable topics in the area, resulting in an industry characterised by many books, blogs, gurus, movies, and so forth, which all compete to teach and sell theories and models on how to create and develop leaders.

Jeffrey Pfeffer's latest book puts into question most of that which we assume to be the key attributes for developing powerful leaders, and it further suggests that the leadership industry has failed miserably in its mission to create great leaders in great environments. Instead, organisations all over the world are full of employees who are extremely unhappy in their stressful and toxic workplaces, who feel unsatisfied, demotivated, and unsatisfied with their employers, and who would leave at the first opportunity. Leaders themselves have failed to sustain their careers, and thousands have not been successful in understanding the politics and power struggles in the upper echelons of their organisations.

¹ HarperCollins, Sep 15, 2015. ISBN: 9780062383167

Pfeffer provides ample evidence for his arguments, originating from scientific studies, real cases, and history, which makes his case even more compelling and mind-challenging. His quest is not unique. In fact, the subject of toxic leadership has been around for more than a decade, but this is a book written by one of the most important authors in the science of Management, who is frequently cited as being one of the most influential thinkers of all time. If he says that leadership is BS (I let you to imagine what “BS” stands for!), then we all should at least reflect about our current convictions regarding leadership.

The book has some examples of why the leadership industry has failed its purpose. Firstly, inspiration and hero-like stories do not work to develop leader attributes. This has been a common technique in developing leaders, whereby the assumption is that by inspiring people to follow powerful fables, they would change and would develop the same great leadership attributes themselves. However, in fact, such fables are what customers and clients wish to be, rather than what they need to be. The examples conveyed in such stories are incomplete, are biased towards the positive side of the fantasy, and their objectives are mainly commercial, rather than scientific. In fact, they distort our perception of reality, and divert our attention from the true aspects of reality. Pfeffer exemplifies this point with very well-known names, who are usually taken to be great leaders, such as Bill Gates, Donald Trump, Jack Welch, and Steve Jobs. These are all commonly referred to as being great leaders, and full of virtues, however this professor from Stanford shows how these great bosses have not-so-nice features and qualities.

Several mechanisms exist for explaining why people use fables to inspire others to follow good principles of leadership, and this book is also very rich in providing such mechanisms. Pfeffer wants readers to understand his points, and thus offers a rich set of explanations for each of his controversial thoughts.

In the next chapters, the author of another acclaimed-book, ‘Competitive Advantage Through People’, analyses five of the attributes that most people accept as being part of successful leadership, and proposes that, in fact, it is their antitheses that are most commonly present in effective leaders. These are: a) immodesty and narcissism; b) lying, omitting, and distorting; c) not being authentic; d) violating and breaking trust and contracts, and; e) taking care of her/himself, rather than her/his employees. In each chapter, as mentioned, Pfeffer uses evidence, statistics, and examples of people and organisations to support his line of reasoning. In addition, for each case he provides comprehensive explanations of why each attribute may help leaders to be more effective than that which is commonly assumed.

The book ends with a set of advice regarding what can be done to change the reality exposed by the author. The main recommendation is taken from the medical sciences, for, in the same way as Pfeffer acknowledges that his book may be negative and depressing, cancer is also depressing. However, medical science has advanced tremendously in treating cancer, by facing the problem as it is, rather than by telling fables about it. Toxic leadership is depressing, yet management sciences have been telling inspiring stories about it, rather than just facing the real problems.

Our knowledge and practice of leadership can only improve when we look at leadership as what it really is, rather than what it should be.

In summary, Leadership BS may be a depressing book, painting a negative image of the world, but it has merit in-so-much as it challenges our deepest assumptions about leadership, and suggests that some of these are totally wrong and that they are leading us into dead-ends when developing better leaders and workplaces is concerned. The author does not present any new theory, or model, or concept about leadership, but instead he leads us to approach the field with a renewed look. Through such a process we can improve our understanding of the practice of leadership.