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HRD Forum — Book Review

Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management challenges and opportunities for HRD

Beware Casual Leaders: Leadership Matters

Book Review by Dr. Alison Pearce

Beware Casual Leaders: Leadership Matters

Andy Portsmouth

Matador, £12.99

Beware casual leaders — they leave casualties wherever they go! So claims Andy Portsmouth, who has worked for some of the UK's and Europe's largest multi-national companies over the past 35 years. Starting as a graduate, he progressed to director before becoming a board-level consultant. The tone of his book is set by the blurb: "Cut through the corporate bullshit. Many organizations are sabotaged from the inside. Their biggest threat is not from competitors but from themselves." The writing style is down-to-earth with many exclamation marks!

The structure of the book is interesting. There are five sections ranging from accountability, through culture to values, each with a useful synopsis at the end. By the second page of the Prologue we learn Andy's four rules, which are conclusions about the working world he drew at an early stage in his career, already disillusioned. They concern the responsibility of the CEO, valuing employees, the value of a good boss and leadership development. Three of these rules are explicitly explored in greater detail later on, but less so the fourth.

Portsmouth is at pains to establish his credentials based on practical experience in a wide variety of industries and companies. Equally, he is clear that he is not an academic, researcher, psychologist, titan of industry, famous entrepreneur, global CEO, known by the City or even the most talented person he knows. This honesty is refreshing and adds to his credibility. His subjective viewpoint is both the strength and the weakness of the book. It is clear from the start why he has found some behaviour in others so problematic. Indeed, a later chapter starts with a direct quote from a mentor "The trouble with you, Andy, is that you are too kind to your team and too hard on your boss". In academic research, this would be an acknowledgement of subjectivity and presented as a limitation. As in academia, this is no reason not to listen, but laudable self-awareness. This is certainly a characteristic valued by the author, who describes it as a constant theme of the book and dedicates a chapter to it. It is a clue to how he defines 'casual leadership'.

For GETM3, the book is relevant given its early premise that the old paradigm no longer applies: leaders were so good at their job that they were promoted to develop others to be equally good. Nowadays, leaders must engage and motivate people whose skills they have never had

and therefore cannot improve. Portsmouth identifies the difference between assertiveness and aggression as key to effectiveness in a younger, better educated and more diverse workforce.

The book races through some of the best established leadership, management and organization theory, which is useful in bringing it all together and applying it, with Portsmouth's interpretation, to 'casual leadership'. Some of these classics go back to the sixties. There is a lesson for academics here to see how your theory is interpreted and used by an industry practitioner, and which is standing the test of time. The author also compiles his own checklists of values, behaviour, competencies etc and helpful summaries of related theories. There are times when the book feels a little outdated, such as when a typical contract is described as 37.5 hours a week, 9-5, Monday-Friday with a fixed salary. It would be especially interesting to consider how 'casual leadership' applies to zero-hours contracts in the gig economy. These are fleetingly mentioned towards the end, in relation only to increasing employment-related stress. Where this book outdoes a standard textbook or airport self-help book is the range of sources, including, for example, the Financial Reporting Council's Guidance on Board Effectiveness and several large-scale, current surveys and polls which inject interest and currency.

In addition, Portsmouth provides a litany of leadership and management horror stories he personally has experienced, at times listing them in a somewhat overwhelming tidal wave of incompetence, sociopathy and worse. This is described as "casual" behaviour, by which I think he means thoughtless, tactless, insensitive, and unconscious. It is certainly a lack of self-awareness and it is applied not only to leaders. Some of it sounds far from 'casual'. I found myself hoping that those implicated would read the book and recognize themselves with shame. Experience tells me they probably will do neither. If you're feeling miserable about your boss, this at least will make you feel less lonely. The author states at one point that "living in reasonable harmony with other people" is the base state common to all of us and I wonder why he thinks this, given his experience. As a teacher, it occurred to me that these examples would make very useful mini case studies to support discussions around leadership, management and handling conflict.

For me, the greatest weakness of this otherwise engaging book are 20 pages dedicated to uncritical admiration and eulogizing of the leadership approach in the armed forces based in the UK and USA. Excellent examplars of something they might be, but here there is no acknowledgement of the limit to which the experience of such organizations can (or wants to) be applied to civilian life. There is no mention of the well-publicized lapses in leadership and other errors which result in atrocities, nor of the long-term damage to military mental health now becoming apparent. The chapter title refers to "life and death" which could have included other examples such as hospitals, the emergency services, NGOs in disaster zones, dangerous industries or space agencies. This is followed by another 15 pages of the same, but this time about New Zealand's highly successful rugby team, the All Blacks. At this point I should declare my own subjective viewpoint as a woman. Now I know women serve in the armed forces (10% at last count) and that women play and watch rugby, but why select and explore so intimately and at length such male-dominated examples? There are five women fully named in this book, and four are in the 30-strong list in the acknowledgements of good leaders with whom the author has worked. Portsmouth expends much effort on understanding the importance of values and yet one of the All Blacks' brand values is 'masculinity'.

As my reading progressed, I found myself disagreeing, at times quite profoundly, with some of the author's assertions. Firstly, introverts (or "loners") can't be team players. I wondered how the values of inclusion, tolerance and political correctness — apparently so highly-prized

by younger people — would sit with this attitude. I recommend reading Jennifer Kahnweiler’s 2018 book *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength* or watching Susan Cain’s 2012 TED talk *The Power of Introverts* (so far viewed 24 million times) which led to her 2013 book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*. Secondly, trust is an absolute with no halfway house. “You do not trust people with your money but not with your confidences”. Well, I don’t share my secrets with my bank or my PIN number with my friends. There is one anecdote about an alleged lack of integrity in which I really wanted to know why the HR manager said she could not afford to pay Nigel his bonus. This was never explained.

Conscious, thanks to his mentor, of a rather harsh attitude to leaders, Portsmouth touches on different leadership styles, and occasionally admits the value of alternative approaches in certain circumstances. His summary of the apparently depressing 2017 Skills and Leadership Survey is used to blame specific leadership styles for problems driven, or exacerbated, by environmental changes such as rapid technological development and flexible working. I can’t decide whether this is justified.

Perhaps cognisant of his high expectations of leaders, he does dedicate space to “ten things your leader deserves” and yet I again found myself in violent disagreement with some of them. Is it realistic and reasonable to “bring the best version of yourself to work every day” with the right energy levels and your game-face on? This seems at odds with the current drive for mental health awareness and the training of mental health first-aiders in larger organizations. A deeply British attitude to work is on display as having “a good gossip with mates” (over breakfast) and a “leisurely boozy lunch on a Friday” (both surely desired extrovert behaviours) are described as ‘theft’. The French will tell you mealtimes are when all the big decisions are made. Further, we must keep our workstations clean and tidy and always be on time. In British culture, “being on time is all about respect”. Personally, I have never felt less stressed at work than when living in a French region where 15 minutes’ grace is a cultural norm. There, people prioritize more important things than punctuality, like talking to a friend or colleague you bump into on the way to the meeting. They avoid taking offence at something as unavoidable as lateness.

These personal diversions in experience and attitude do not detract from what is a common sense and highly readable account of the author’s accumulated experience and wisdom. The suggestions of useable theory and models add value and meaning to the author’s cathartic appeal for better, more people-focused leadership. And I have to agree with him!

The Reviewer

Dr. Alison Pearce is Associate Professor of Strategic Entrepreneurship at Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University, UK, Affiliate Professor at Grenoble Ecole de Management, France and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. One of the original cohort of British Erasmus students sent abroad in 1987 she spent 15 years living and working internationally in marketing, design and product development culminating in Head of Innovation and Business Development and running her own marketing and design consultancy. She is now the convenor of a faculty Research Interest Group and her work has been published in academic journals, industry magazines, books, blogs, and news media. An original member of the GETM3 team, Alison led the funding bid and now leads the project’s overall implementation, undertaking secondments in Ireland, Poland, Slovenia, and Korea.

