

BOOK REVIEWS

Siegel, David.

Leaders in the Shadows: The Leadership Qualities of Municipal Chief Administrative Officers.

Toronto: IPAC/University of Toronto Press, 2015.

xiii, 324 pages.

ISBN-13: 978-1442626652

In *Leaders in the Shadows*, the fourth volume in the IPAC Series in Public Management and Governance to focus on leadership, David Siegel has set his task as determining if the ‘heroes’ he studies here “are exceptional because they have developed a particular set of traits, skills and behaviours that anyone is capable of developing” (9). This turns out to be a rhetorical question, but also one which Dr. Siegel has the experience to answer well. To do this he presents five accomplished case studies of very able municipal CAOs in Canada.

After a strong Introduction, the first chapter wanders professionally, thoughtfully through a standard catalogue of the literature surrounding leadership (roughly since Magna Carta). The small problem is that the author finds some measure of validity in each snippet or approach considered. There is precious little prioritizing so his conclusion follows that effective local government leadership is, to all intents and purposes, essentially idiosyncratic and quite possibly locale-specific (51).

Through his meticulous research of successful CAOs in action Dr. Siegel produces a set of five by no means mutually exclusive leadership styles as characterized by his quite commendable prototypes. These are career public officials and in each case the author first produces a 411 cascade of personal information, occupational development choices and administrative honours received. He then produces, using a strategy of comprehensive interviews with those in positions to know, a 360 assessment of how CAOs sitting “at the pinch point of the hourglass” can lead both council and staff to best policies not only in theory but also in application (50).

In these pages, leadership is pretty much all about getting other people to perform well. The Leader-Generalist (Michael Fenn, Hamilton) uses “his emotional intelligence to develop a team around him that could take charge of managing the municipality” (78) while the Task-oriented Leader (Mike Garrett, Toronto) “did what a leader does; he accepted responsibility for what happened on his watch” (79) while still placing “a great deal of trust in [staff] and did not attempt to micromanage their operations” (114). The Relationship-oriented Leader (Judy Rogers, Vancouver) “had good people in senior positions ... [and] when you develop this kind of reputation, it becomes easier to recruit high-quality staff” (151), the Leader as Partnership Builder (Keith Robicheau, Kentville) is “seen as a keen judge of people ... for taking the time to get to know the people around him [treating] everyone from the mayor to the janitor, with a great deal of respect” (177) and, finally, the Leader as an Open, Collaborative Booster (Robert Earl, Banff) shows staff that “he is excited about his work, passionate about ... outdoor experiences generally [and] those kinds of things are infectious” (231).

A few comments can be offered by way of assessing all this. First, there are no klutzes in the Siegelian quest for best managers and early on in his search for leaders who are ‘the best and brightest,’ both ethical and effective, Siegel makes the legitimate point that “The interviewees ... provided as much information about the characteristics of poor leaders, however, as they did about the good ones” (11). Enough said. However, the toughest lesson for municipal public servants, in both appreciation and application, is almost hidden away in the eddies of chapter five: “A CAO cannot become so invested in her or his own view of the municipality that it becomes impossible to implement council’s decisions that do not align ...” (194). This is well said.

There are two endemic problems however. First, each case study offers considerable praise for their subject for finding the status quo unsatisfactory, being ‘change-oriented’ and ‘open to new ideas’—but who is not? And, is a simple change always good? What is absent is any test of significance or determination of what if anything was genuinely, seriously, innovative apart from ‘not tried here before.’ There is also the matter of relative size: the author says “there is a real qualitative difference in the role of the CAO in places of different sizes” (192). Okay, I’ll bite. What is it? Apart from the possibility that those in smaller communities get to know their ‘customers’ and might have to lend a hand in taking out the trash (248) this genuine issue is left as an interesting, but tangential, thought.

The author’s long concluding chapter might best be approached as a summary guide to mentorship for the administrative newbie and a pat on the back for the established professional. Dr. Siegel ends as he began (233, 20) with Thomas Carlyle’s “great man” hypothesis only to find it as unhelpful as he had originally supposed. At best, he finds that effective leaders were seen as those being able to assemble a group that can sift through lingering problems and devise better plans (235-6). This is where we started: “leadership can mean many different things and its meaning can shift in different circumstances” (31), and that is where we are left. The author would have been better advised to channel Niccolo Machiavelli who made the point in 1513, in chapter 22 of *The Prince*, that “The first opinion which one forms of a prince, and of his understanding, is by observing the men he has around him; and when they are capable and faithful he may always be considered wise ...” There are at least six iterations of this same thought in the pages of *Shadows*.

Finally, as for the one important question of whether leaders are born or built, Siegel appears to buy into the theory that while most folks are unlikely to become leaders in private or public life, leadership attributes can still be honed through opportunity and devoting time along the lines of “learning how to be a ballet dancer or mastering a sport” (273). I am not yet persuaded that this is so.

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