

Naval War College Review

Volume 63
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 15

2010

Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges

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Recommended Citation

Kniskern, Hank and Williams, Dean (2010) "Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 63 : No. 4 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss4/15>

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE FACES OF LEADERSHIP

Williams, Dean. *Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005. 296pp. \$29.95

There seems to be no shortage of disappointing leaders these days. Tony Hayward of the BP oil well disaster, General Stanley McChrystal in Afghanistan, and our Wall Street CEOs are recent examples. The thoughtful book *Real Leadership* offers insight into why these accomplished leaders stumbled: their leadership mind-sets and behaviors were poignantly inadequate given the situational context and complexity.

Dean Williams, of Harvard's Kennedy School and member of Harvard's Center for Public Leadership, draws from a wide range of academic experience and research. Many of the author's perspectives are notably influenced by Harvard colleague Ronald Heifetz, who has written and lectured extensively about adaptive leadership.

Early in the book Williams introduces the concept of "counterfeit leadership." Counterfeit leaders offer superficial, quick-fix solutions for complex problems. They are prolific launchers of "false tasks" that do little to improve the situation, distract the organization from facing reality, and diffuse the leaders' moral obligations. These leaders

habitually stay within their comfort zones by relying on positional power and factional loyalty. They sidestep the essential work of executing meaningful change. Counterfeit leaders are not intentionally deceitful, but rather, as in theater, they act out popular scripts to accommodating audiences.

In contrast, "real leaders" provide wisdom and energy. They take responsibility for mobilizing people to confront reality, which requires that they engage in the tough task of provoking people to modify their values, preferences, traditions, and priorities.

The process of *Real Leadership* is quite pragmatic and demands three commitments: deep understanding of reality ("diagnostic competence"), self-knowledge ("personal case"), and constant reassessment (metaphorically called "mirrors"). Williams places a great deal of emphasis on thorough, reality-centered diagnostics.

The book explains six types of specific leadership challenges. These six categories are not meant to imply definitive boundaries but rather to differentiate

unique leadership situations. Each leadership challenge presents a diagnostic profile and recommends intervention strategies. For example, one category is called the “activist challenge.” This is a situation where the organization refuses to acknowledge or respond to changes in reality though its performance or survival depends on it.

This is an informed, well structured, and immensely readable book about adaptive leadership. It is pragmatic, while providing keen perspectives and insights. A deeper discussion of power and authority and their influence on adaptive leadership would have been beneficial, but the book’s refreshing diversity of illustrative leadership examples is a rich contribution.

Although this work was published five years ago, its content is still relevant and applicable, perhaps even more than ever, because of increasing disillusionment with contemporary leadership. It prompts us to consider critically whether some closely held values and assumptions are paradoxically detrimental. (An excellent and recent book about adaptive leadership is *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, Harvard Business Press, 2009.)

HANK KNISKERN
Naval War College



Schmitt, Gary J., ed. *The Rise of China: Essays on the Future Competition*. New York: Encounter Books, 2009. 191pp. \$21.95

Gary J. Schmitt is a resident scholar at the conservative Washington think tank the American Enterprise Institute

(AEI), where he is also the director of the Program on Advanced Strategic Studies. Prior to coming to AEI he was a member of the professional staff of the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, serving as the committee’s minority staff director.

As its title indicates, this edited volume examines various facets of China’s rise to Asian and global eminence and the implications of that rise for established powers, led by the United States. This work not only performs a service by exploring the contours of Chinese power but furnishes a barometer suggesting how right-leaning China scholars think about U.S. strategy toward a newly assertive Beijing. This book constitutes an excellent primer on East Asia’s future and America’s place in the region.

Among the contributing authors are well-known China hands like Ashley J. Tellis (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) and Dan Blumenthal (AEI’s U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission). Despite the authors’ hawkish reputations, however, the book takes a determinedly measured tone, which constitutes one of its most appealing traits.

Schmitt leads off by observing that it is not the rise of *China* but of the *People’s Republic of China* that inspires forebodings in Asia and the West. The swift rise of any power disturbs the existing equilibrium, making for uncertainty and friction. The ascent of the United States to world power over a century ago gave rise to testy Anglo-American relations for a time, before British leaders concluded that the Royal Navy could not maintain a squadron in the Western Hemisphere strong enough to overpower the armored,