

On Mission and Leadership

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*On Mission and Leadership* comprises articles previously published in the *Leader to Leader* journal from the portentously titled “Drucker Foundation”. The 12 pieces, culled from this journal, are of uneven quality, though they all share the characteristics of brevity and authorial conviction.

The targeted readership of “busy executives with little spare time” will appreciate many of these short, sharp meditations on the importance of leading with vision or, in the management parlance, mission-focused management. Conversely, academics will find the paucity of critical reflection and the general over-reliance on anecdotes frustrating and, in places, superficial.

The best chapters are by David M. Lawrence on “Maintaining a mission” and Henry Mintzberg on “Managing quietly”. Lawrence is chairman and CEO of Kaiser Permanent, the USA’s largest non-profit health-care organisation. His article draws on his intriguing experiences and describes eight lessons for organisations in the marketplace that want to retain their social mission. His recommendations, which are logical if not entirely original, are given greater resonance because they seek to extract lessons on how the marketplace can enhance rather than diminish an organisation’s social mission. State employees will be particularly interested in his conclusions

Mintzberg’s contribution is also conspicuous, in this volume, in that he places his consideration of management and leadership within a textured framework, in his case, one that “appreciates the past”. Thus he avoids tingeing his arguments with the garish market triumphalism and bull market complacency that are discernible from too many of this volume’s contributors. Mintzberg writes incisively, “Is ‘Shareholder value’ new as well, or just another old way to sell the future cheap? Is it just an easy way for chief executives without ideas to squeeze money out of rich corporations? This mercenary model of management (greed is good, only numbers count, people are human ‘resources’ who must be paid less so that executives can be paid more, and so on) is so antisocial that it will doom us if we don’t doom it first.” Observations that many market investors, ruing their recent “downsized” portfolios, will find prophetic. Mintzberg also underlines the importance of managing beyond fads and inspiring colleagues by strengthening the “cultural bonds between people, not by treating them as detachable ‘human resources’ (probably the most offensive term ever coined in management, at least until ‘human capital’ came along). When people are trusted they do not have to be empowered.” Again, one can concur with this adroit reflection, especially if one has been empowered.

Daniel Coleman of “emotional intelligence” fame also contributes a chapter. However, his article, “The emotional intelligence of leaders”, illustrates the limitations of this collection. His arguments cannot be adequately developed in the format of a short article. Moreover,

as an introduction to his theories readers may be left with the distinct impression that Goldman has undermined a good argument by overstating it; his more extended writing allows Goldman to offer a more nuanced and reflective case for his theories.

Chapter three is a transcript of a soft focused interview with Anita Roddick in which she argues for the “Leader as social advocate: building the business by building the community”. The tone of the interview is evident in her claim that “We won lots of awards for marketing but we never really knew what it was.” A contrary view is that she is being typically disingenuous and that Body Shop has always conducted effective public relations campaigns to “greenwash” its operations in order to charge premium prices for oil- and water-based products. Roddick is then on her familiar terrain of arguing for a socially responsible business model, a fashionable early 1990s business movement, which has become frayed through its inability to address key criticisms. For instance, her tendency to cluster indigenous Third-World people and their “ancient wisdom” into one amorphous mass has been accused of being both inaccurate and patronising. At a more prosaic level Roddick’s carefully managed anti-big business image has perhaps been undermined by her organisation’s sourcing and employment practices, which critics claim are identical to the very corporations that she castigates in her interview with her customary self-righteous venom.

*On Mission and Leadership* has the aim of providing the “best thinking from top experts” on leadership and this is partly achieved, though a more accurate summation would be “bite or mini-sized thinking from business leaders”. The collection is also curious in being instantly dated like a reverse Dorian Gray, as if it belonged to a different business age. It can be recommended for those seeking instant access to leadership observations and for those who do not have the time or inclination to spend more than minimal time on the subject.