

The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership

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Steven B. Sample's *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership* calls widely on the authors' impressive range of leadership experience, including striking examples from his current position as president of the University of Southern California (USC). This is both a strength and, at times, a weakness of this provocative consideration of effective leadership: a strength because the author offers a number of insightful observations based on his own experiences, a weakness because too often anecdotes are presented when analysis is needed to support the leadership concepts under discussion. Written from an American perspective, non-Americans will find the syntax challenging, for instance, in the acknowledgements, the author comments on a colleague's assistance in writing the book, "I would never have gotten it done without Rob's persistent handholding, creative ideas and brilliant editorial skills."

The introduction sets out the author's central conceits that leadership is highly situational and contingent. He also contends that leadership can be taught and learned; but not by mimicking a famous exponent of leadership or by slavishly adhering to conventional wisdom. Of course, the extent to which there is a canon of conventional wisdom on leadership in practice is open to debate. Sample also reveals that his inspiration for this book, in part, derives from the "privilege" of co-teaching-with Warren Bennis – a course on leadership to "USC's brightest". Leaders studied range from Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King to Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan and it would have been instructive if the criteria for choosing these exemplars of leadership had been revealed.

Chapter one is indicative of the breathless style of the rest of the book. Aristotle, Napoleon, Washington, Rommel, Teddy Roosevelt, Soloman Asch, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Franklin Roosevelt, Orson Welles, Nietzsche, Mozart, Picasso and Shakespeare are all mentioned within the space of 12 pages. This profusion of name-checks slightly derives from the rest of the chapter, which contains a number of incisive observations, such as the practice of leadership being an art, not a science and on the necessity of avoiding "binary and instant judgments".

Chapter two considers the necessity of artful listening in achieving excellence in leadership. An opinionated chapter follows; this considers the role of experts, emphasising that leaders should maintain their intellectual independence and not confuse expertise for leadership. These observations are well developed. However the author is also willing to offer intemperate criticisms, presumably in what he would term a "contrarian" fashion. For example, Freud is dismissed as too fuzzy, Wright's architecture is labelled "a dismal failure" and elsewhere he opines, "I'm always astounded by the extent of the herd instinct within the artistic profession," concluding that most of them are, "slaves to fashion." If nothing else, this approach will provoke a reaction from the reader.

The next chapter continues in the same controversial vein. Entitled “You are what you read” the author argues that reading can sap intellectual independence. As evidence for this the author boasts about the benefits of his experiment in shunning newspapers and the media for six months. In contrast, the author admits, apart from the previously mentioned reading hiatus, to spending 30 minutes a day reading. In his own words, the result has been that, “... I’ve gotten a pretty good liberal education, especially for an engineer.” From this lofty, self-educated vantage Sample then introduces writers that offer ‘timeless truths about human nature’. To be sure, these, “supertexts” are the ones oft-referenced in tomes on leadership. However, it would have been informative if a more lengthy discussion on the criteria for inclusion into the “supertexts” had been included.

Chapter five coherently considers decision making, finding time to praise Reagan’s crisis management when he personally fired striking air traffic controllers in 1981. There is also a baffling reference to Greek houses and Greek life at the author’s university.

Chapter six offers an unusual interpretation of Machiavelli and although the author is certainly not a Renaissance historian, he approaches “Uncle Niccolo” with freshness and spiritedly promotes the benefits for modern leaders in considering the brutal philosophy of the Florentine. However, the value of the author’s lengthy quotes is limited by his failure to provide any referencing. Chapter seven develops these “realpolitik” ideas by considering historical figures such as Thomas Moore and Henry VIII – the latter being described as a “... morally depraved pig who murdered his wives”! The message of this chapter is for the leader to select with care the areas that they regard as essential to their ability to succeed as a leader. Chapter eight contains practical advice on how best to manage colleagues, discussing hiring and firing strategies, the value of job descriptions and the necessity of championing diversity within organisations.

The next two chapters offer a definition of a leader as, “someone who has identifiable followers over whom he exercises power and authority through his actions and decisions,” a sound definition. In addition, there is a provocative observation on the metaphor of war, which the author contends serves to power the free market resulting in heightened efficiency and more brilliantly sharpened leadership. Chapter ten discusses the realities of leadership and references the author’s varied leadership experiences. The concluding chapter offers a case study that illustrates the author’s “Contrarian Leadership” during his tenure as president of the USC, baldly revealing this leadership concept in action.

This is a self-confident book with the author promiscuously blending his own experiences with interpretations on the leadership lessons to be gleaned from the “greats” from history. It is anecdotal, name drops to a prodigious degree, yet it is worth reading for the insights it offers on leadership in contemporary American higher education.