

The genuine article

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How to be the perfect CEO

MANY business books assume that potential leaders are a blank canvas onto which must be hurled a particular set of habits and characteristics in order to form the perfect chief executive of the future. Others assume that to become a better boss executives need do no more than ape other corporate high-flyers or draw inspiration from leaders in other walks of life. In this vein, for example, there is the Jack Welch model and the Richard Branson model.

Military commanders are a favourite—military metaphors still abound in the corporate world—and Napoleon and Alexander feature frequently. Alexander's record on globalisation, however, is the more appealing in the current business climate. Failure to make it in Moscow and being offshored on St Helena are not to be found on the CVs of potential business leaders of today.

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, two British academics, eschew the notion that effective bosses can be constructed piecemeal. Their implicit message is that bosses are born, or at least made before they delve into books on management. Rather than suggesting that high-quality leaders can be constructed from what they dismiss as an "amalgam of traits", they stress that there are "no universal leadership characteristics". The talent that the pair thinks most vital is "authenticity".

After 25 years spent observing well-regarded chief executives and good managers further down the ladder, the authors conclude that those who are true to characteristics they already possess make the best bosses. Their message to the aspiring high-flyer is "be yourself", have a lot of self-knowledge and be comfortable with who you are. Identikit executives hiding behind the latest management fad, ambitious role players, time-servers and office politicians may manage to creep to the top. But Messrs Jones and Goffee insist that those they seek to lead will soon find them out. Authenticity cannot be faked, they say, and a little eccentricity won't hurt either. The authors approvingly cite Mr Branson's casual style and endearing difference from the norm that his followers appreciate.

Displaying other differences, foibles or even shortcomings, they say, adds to the authenticity, and they give examples of the kinds of

differences that bosses should exude. When CEO of Unilever, Niall FitzGerald gave free vent to his Irishness; Franz Humer's passion was on display for all to see at Roche; and the BBC revelled in Greg Dyke's "blokeishness".

The authors do concede that there are techniques which can improve leadership. Some characteristics work better than others, so play these up. But they warn against phoney sincerity, and (perhaps surprisingly) they advocate displays of weakness. Mr Dyke had a notoriously bad temper; Alain Levy of PolyGram could be blunt and emotional. Appear human and your leadership will seem more attractive.

The authors go on to make some fairly obvious points that the truly authentic and self-aware could probably work out for themselves: be conscious of how well you read situations (and try to get better); conform (but not too much); get close to your underlings (but not too close); and communicate authentically too. Are you better on e-mail or face-to-face? They cite Mr Welch's use of experiences from his boyhood in his communiqués as a way of conveying authenticity. They suggest trying a little humour—which is surely not a good idea if you are not authentically funny.

It is a shame that the British authors offer many more examples from Europe than they do from America. The reader is left wondering whether revealing eccentricities in a land where conformity is more highly prized (and weaknesses where capitalism is reddest in tooth and claw) would meet with less success. Wal-Mart, Microsoft and other hugely successful American companies have been led by rather unexceptional people with little sense of humour.

Readers looking for detailed and specific advice on being a good manager may feel that the authors' message is a little too vague. Managers who are unpleasant by nature may also want to try another approach. That said, "be yourself" is doubtless good advice for anyone yearning to lead hundreds and thousands of employees. Or indeed anyone merely wishing to lead a happy life.

Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?
Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones
Harvard Business School Press; 256 pages; \$26.95