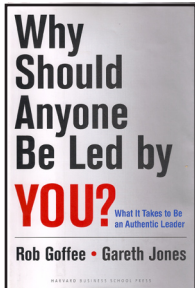


Book Reviews for Managers

Why Should Anyone Be Led by YOU?

What it Takes to be an Authentic Leader

by Rob Goffee & Gareth Jones



Harvard Business School
Press, 2006
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“How much of your true self should you reveal to your staff?”

REVIEWED BY IAN COOK

People want to be led by a person, the authors contend, not by someone with a fancy job title or a manager who has amassed a vast chunk of organizational turf. Employees will choose to follow only a real, live, breathing human being who reveals at least some of their humanity, values, personality and, yes, vulnerability.

This is an intriguing point-of-view and one with which I agree. If you, as a leader, accept it too, it raises for you a question: *how much of your true self should you reveal to your staff?* Should you be an open book, or should there be an element of mystery about you? As General Charles DeGaulle said, “There must always be something about the leader which others cannot fathom.”

Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones, two Brits who offer a number of European stories and examples in their book, essentially agree with the French President: you should self disclose but not too much, making yourself “interestingly enigmatic.” They say that it all comes down to three key areas for leaders as they craft the nature of that space between themselves and their employees:

1. Knowing yourself
2. Managing the balance in a number of aspects of your relationships
3. Engaging in what they call “Situational Sensing”

Knowing Yourself

Obviously, in order to self-disclose, you need to know about yourself. Not surprisingly, the research on effective leaders identifies self-awareness as a core competency. To begin with, you should be clear on your strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes this calls for you to take a look back at your earlier, formative years. Simon Guilford, Marketing Director at Barclay’s Bank, takes a golfing vacation every year with a group of long-standing friends from the small Welsh town of Pontypridd, where he grew up. That is how he reconnects with his roots.

But, more specifically, the writers say you need to figure out *what it is about you that causes others to be influenced by you and choose to follow you*. What works for you when you are leading at your best? Is it part of your personality, for example, your ability to put people at ease? Or is it perhaps your ability to stay focused and composed when under pressure? For Virgin’s Richard Branson, it is his nonconformity and informality, for Bill Clinton, his engaging speaking ability and his personal charm.

Finally, you must know what you want, what your purpose is, what you intend to create in your current leadership role. Again not surprisingly, a clear vision is another research-supported hallmark of effective leaders.

Managing the Balance

Leading others has been likened to an ongoing dance and this book really

demonstrates how this is so. It lists three natural, inherent tensions that leaders must manage well if they are to be effective.

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1. *How much do I reveal and should it be just my strengths or also some weaknesses and areas where I'm not so knowledgeable?* Your employees need to know enough about you to be able to relate to and come to trust your human side. They don't, however, want to be privy to too many weaknesses because that will detract from the strong leader they want to see in you.
2. *How personally close should I be with my direct reports?* This involves what is known as “social distance” and you want to use it skillfully. Establish a sufficiently personal connection to process the emotional elements in your working relationships but not so close that you can't impose and, if necessary, enforce the challenging performance expectations you have of your staff.

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The book recounts the story of Karel Vuursteen who took over a rather complacent Heineken Brewery in the early 1990's. Knowing how much he needed to shake up the culture there, he remained (uncharacteristically for him) distant with his executives until he had sufficiently scared them with the reality of how vulnerable they were to losing market share to the competition. Once his top team demonstrated that they were performing with the requisite competitive sense of urgency, Vuursteen was able to shift to his more natural closer style of relating.

3. *How hard do I push my own performance standards and insist that my people conform to the values I have articulated and modeled in my unit or in the organization as a whole?* For a response to this question see “situational sensing,” below.

Situational Sensing

So many new leaders, the authors say, start out from day one like a wild west sheriff, riding into town with guns blazing and imposing their law and authority with little interest in the context of the situation, the history of the town, or what the people want.

So then, how should our latter day “sheriff” come into a new leadership situation? Goffee and Jones recommend a low key entry. Timing is everything. As a newly appointed leader, especially if coming in from outside the department or organization, you are advised to delay imposing your standards right away and instead do some *situational sensing*:

- Spend time early on observing, asking questions, and listening, with a goal to understanding the current status quo, your direct reports, other key players and the employee group, their skills, perspectives and needs.
- As much as possible, adapt your behavior in the short run to fit in with the existing culture.
- Once you have determined what needs to be changed and how best to change it, you can begin to assert your own values and expectations.

When Greg Dyke became Director General of the BBC, he toured the local offices across Britain to get a first hand read, vs. just accepting the established view from head office. What he found was a professional staff who possessed innovative ideas and a strong commitment to public-service broadcasting but who were afraid to buck the formality of the hierarchy. Then Dyke began by, to use the authors' term, “rewriting the context.” He phased out limos and chauffeurs, cut the budgets for external consultants, and even showed up for a presentation to regional employees the day after his own home had tragically burned down.

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Ian Cook, trainer, consultant, keynote speaker and Principal of Fulcrum Associates Inc., helps executives and managers get more from their people and teams through modern leadership approaches. Contact Ian to discuss the ideas in this article or to find out about related training programs, facilitation and coaching services, and keynote presentations for your organization.

This whole idea about new managers or CEO's not rushing to impose their "new order around here" is probably the most useful message from this book. Again, because timing is everything, you must not wait too long to begin moving on your own agenda and ways of operating. There are no hard and fast guidelines for when to start asserting yourself. Essentially, it is your intuitive judgment call as leader.

Situational sensing requires you to operate outside of your comfort zone for at least awhile. Most leaders are action-oriented. To the extent this is true of you, this front-end waiting and observing phase will be uncomfortable for you. It will demand patience and self-confidence as you immerse yourself in the culture you are inheriting.

I have just two caveats about this book. First, it covers essentially only three elements, a much narrower treatment than the title seems to promise. Second, how "authentic" are you being when you consciously measure out your display of openness and closeness/distance and when you delay overtly modeling your own style and values? That said, the authors offer some important contributions to the art of leading.

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