Book Review

The Leadership Code: Five Rules to Lead By
by Dave Ulrich, Norm Smallwood and Kate Sweetman
Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2008

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INTRODUCTION

The search for an understanding of effective leadership has been ongoing for centuries and there are thousands of books and publications which aim to shed light on various dimensions of leadership theory, approaches and outcomes. Practitioners and academics are preoccupied with the concept of leadership and what constitutes effective leadership. In the case of leadership, perhaps the French novelist Remy De Gourmant (in Bass and Bass, 2008: 3) is accurate in stating that 'a definition of leadership is a sack of flour compressed into a thimble'. We know good (and poor) leadership when we see it, yet it is not easily distilled into a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

The Leadership Code: Five Rules to Lead By is written by a prominent author and commentator in the human resources field, Dave Ulrich, and two colleagues of his. The authors reviewed the extant leadership literature and conducted interviews with 'thought leaders' to inform the book. The authors claim that the same five essentials of effective leadership were repeated in interviews with highly regarded thought leaders, including Richard Boyatzis, Jay Conger, Marshall Goldsmith, Gary Hamel, Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman. The book is organised around five key principles, or codes, which enable effective leadership.

The authors do not necessarily reveal any new solutions or theories on becoming a 'great leader'. Rather, this book synthesises the thicket of leadership competency models into a unified view of leadership. In writing the book, the authors' goal is to 'identify an underlying framework of knowledge, skills and values common to all effective leaders' (p. 5). This model, the Leadership Code, is based on the premise that being an effective leader starts with one's self. The leader must model what they want others to master. This dimension of 'personal proficiency' is at the core of effective leadership. Without personal proficiency it is not possible to keep the other dimensions in balance. The Leadership Code

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maps across two dimensions: time and attention. In short, the model presents both a long-term and short-term perspective on the organisation and the individual. According to the authors, they:

> …have examined the broad field, talked in depth with the smartest leadership people [they] know, and passed all that information through the screen of [their] hundred years of experience in the field. Through the process, [they] have discovered and validated what [they] now know to be the five essential rules all leaders must follow (p. 25).

The book is organised around the five rules of effective leadership and a chapter is dedicated to each of the five rules, which are as follows:

RULE 1: SHAPE THE FUTURE

Meeting current business challenges in a global environment requires strategic leadership. The strategist keeps the long-term perspective of the organisation foremost in their minds. The leader must know the direction they are going and ensure everyone else does too. They must not just envision the future but must also be able to create it. While preferring to live in the abstract and the future world of strategy, they ensure that they remain up to date with the ever-changing external landscape of the macro environment, such as technology, demographics and political realities. The key constituents of the strategist domain are strategic vision, creating a customer-centric view of strategy, engaging the organisation in developing strategy, and creating a strategic footing in the organisation. The authors claim that this long-term organisational level perspective is one of the key rules of effective leadership.

RULE 2: MAKE THINGS HAPPEN

The leader who demonstrates the ability to make things happen, also termed 'the executor' by the authors, translates strategy into action, assigning accountability and ensuring teams work well together. Executors keep the near-term perspective of the organisation to the forefront. The executor element of the leader focuses on the question, 'How will we make sure we get to where we are going?' (p. 15). The key components of the executor domain are making change happen, following a decision protocol, ensuring accountability, building teams and ensuring technical proficiency.

RULE 3: ENGAGE TODAY'S TALENT

A talent manager gets important things done in a short period of time in a way that builds engagement and commitment within the team. People in organisations need to work together collectively toward a common goal, and at the same time they need to be able to express who they are individually. Talent managers identify what skills are required, develop people, engage them and ensure that employees put in their best efforts. According to the authors, talent managers maintain a near-term perspective on the human resources in the organisation. Furthermore, they assert that talent managers know how to identify,

build and engage talent to achieve the results in the short term. The critical elements of the talent manager domain are the ability to communicate with a clear and consistent message, to create an aligned direction and to clearly articulate that direction to internal and external stakeholders.

RULE 4: BUILD THE NEXT GENERATION TALENT

Having networks and relationships are important both inside and outside the organisation. A long-term perspective on people and capability in the organisation is central to the human capital developer domain of effective leadership. Human capital developers focus on the next generation, ensuring the organisation has the long-term competencies required for future strategic success. They maintain a clear line of vision between the future strategy and the competencies and skills required by the organisation to deliver that strategy. They possess the skills to coach and sponsor their staff to enable the right talent to be developed for the future. The decisive aspects of this domain are the leaders' ability to map the workforce to build the next generation, to align organisation and employee expectations, to support career development, and to encourage networking and relationship building.

RULE 5: INVEST IN YOURSELF

Personal proficiency is the ultimate rule of leadership, and it starts with leaders knowing and understanding themselves in terms of their strengths and development needs, among others. The authors contend that 'at the heart of the leadership code literally and figuratively is personal proficiency' (p. 17). They believe that at the core of the Leadership Code are the personal qualities and characteristics of the leader. Furthermore, they assert that an effective leader cannot be measured just by what they know and do; it is also about who they are as human beings and how much they can accomplish with and through other people. The defining elements of this domain are for the leader to know themselves, to have the ability to practice clear thinking, to be able to tolerate stress, to tend to character and integrity, and to demonstrate personal energy and passion to ultimately deliver results. The authors argue that if leaders are not grounded through their values and beliefs, credible through their judgement and decision making, emotionally mature, and willing to learn and grow as a leader, they will not be prepared to be a strategist, executor, talent manager or human capital developer. Investing in this self-knowledge results in personal proficiency where leaders know their predispositions, strengths and weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

The book concludes by discussing how organisations can ensure 'better leaders' and 'better leadership' by establishing a clear theory of leadership important to the organisation, assessing leaders against this framework, investing in leadership development and aligning organisational practices. The book provides a useful platform through which managers and leaders can reflect on their personal leadership behaviours and assess their own strengths and development needs. There is an associated 360-degree feedback assessment methodology which is underpinned by the Leadership Code. This assessment

process can be used to assess leadership capability against the five rules of effective leadership. Given that the book is quite recently published, there is a dearth of academic studies which explore the statistical validity of the theory and this will be a welcome development in the field. The latter is necessary to demonstrate that these five leadership dimensions are distinct factors and act as antecedents to effective leadership in practice.

REFERENCES

Bass, B. and Bass, R. (2008) *The Bass Handbook of Leadership*, New York: The Free Press.