

## The Leader's Gift

**A HINDU PARABLE TELLS US THAT, MANY YEARS** ago, the gods were worried about the possibility of man finding divine wisdom. What if he then challenged the supremacy of the gods? So they decided to hide divine wisdom. But what hiding place would be safe from man? Could they bury the secret in the farthest corner of the earth? Restlessly exploring, man might find it. On the highest mountaintop? Someone would eventually climb it. The deepest ocean? Man could build a machine to dive into it. "I know," said the oldest and wisest of the gods, "let's hide it the one place man will never think to look—in his own heart."

Each business challenge requires a unique response, one that is perfectly tailored to the events and circumstances at hand. The bad news is that we can never learn by rote the techniques and solutions to every situation that may arise.

The good news is that all of us share the gift of innate wisdom. We all have innate, powerful resources. We may not know what to do in every situation, but we do know that we will find a way to get the answer. Our creativity and insight can be counted on to emerge as needed.

So if everyone actually has within them what they need to lead, then what gift can we give to an aspiring leader? Perhaps books that provide guideposts along the trail.

Management and leadership books range from how-to techniques to hagiography. Leaders have also written books about their own experiences. Personal stories and insights can be memorable. Newly

promoted managers may well devour such books, searching for the secret sauce that they can apply to their situations. But too many former CEOs are hard-pressed to go beyond their own stories. This leaves readers struggling to apply these lessons to their own lives.

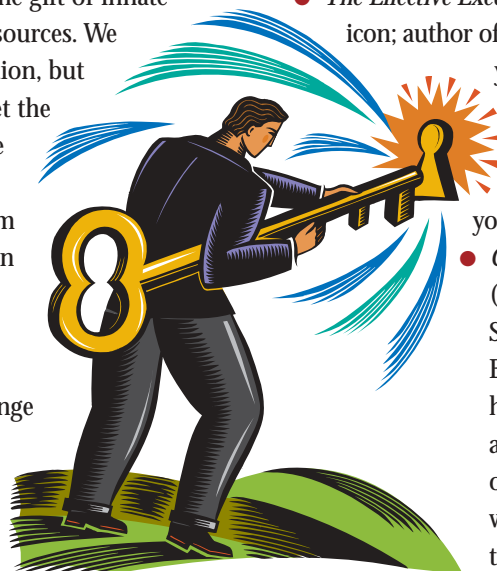
In our own leadership journeys, a few books stand out. We refer to them time and again for pragmatic advice, for understanding motivations, for specific tools, for inspiration. Here are selections from our "leader's bookshelf."

### Seeking pragmatic advice and role models

- *On Becoming a Leader* by Warren Bennis (Distinguished Professor and Founding Chairman of USC's Leadership Institute). A wonderful primer that describes the essence of the leadership role in terms of job content.

- *The Effective Executive* by Peter Drucker (business icon; author of some 30 books over the past 60 years). The bible on leading that offers practical and pragmatic advice about running organizations. A reference source when your own knowledge is tapped out.

- *Good to Great* by Jim Collins (former faculty member at Stanford's Graduate School of Business). Leaders operate at a hierarchy of five levels. The best are paradoxically humble, walking on the path of insight. They use wisdom to accomplish great things in the face of pessimism,



- doubt, and lousy performance.
- *Servant Leadership* by Robert K. Greenleaf (essayist who had two careers—at AT&T and in academe from the Harvard Business School to the Ford Foundation). A somewhat off-putting title that underscores how radically different a great leader is from those who seek self-aggrandizement or acclaim. The servant leader is the one whose work is so subtle and is based on such profound understanding of being human that those being led believe they achieved the results on their own.

#### Exploring human nature to inform leadership

- *Leadership Is an Art and Leadership Jazz* by Max Dupree (former chairman of Herman Miller). Two classics written by a CEO who realized that understanding human nature lies at the heart of great leaders.
- *What Leaders Really Do* by John Kotter (leadership professor at Harvard Business School). Kotter describes the basic principles that enable leaders to stimulate change, keep focus, and get results.

#### Finding the meaning that makes it all worthwhile

- *Synchronicity: The Inner Path* by Joe Jaworski (former litigator; founder of the American Leadership Forum; currently chairman of Generon Consulting). Wonderful story of one man's journey to become an enlightened leader and the many miracles that appeared from nowhere when the results were most in doubt. Inspiring.
- *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* by David Whyte (poet and business

consultant). Introducing poetry to the workplace as a tool for understanding individual and organizational creativity.

- *Love & Profit: The Art of Caring Leadership* by James A. Autry (former president of Meredith Magazine Group). A collection of poems, letters, and essays that explores the emotional and spiritual issues that are the unspoken subtext of every office.

#### Developing essential building blocks

- *Transitions* by William Bridges (named one of the top 10 executive development presenters in the U.S. by *The Wall Street Journal*). Strategies for coping with difficult, painful, and confusing times. Particularly helpful is a way of looking at change that encourages greater comfort with being uncomfortable.
- *Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (based on 15 years of research at the Harvard Negotiation Project). Whether dealing with an unhappy customer or an underperforming employee, the starting point is being able to discern how different perspectives get in the way.
- *Turning to One Another* by Margaret J. Wheatley (author and organizational consultant). Organizations exist to accomplish things we can't do alone. Effective leaders understand the power of support—given and received. And that begins with “conversations about things that are important.” But with all that, there is still an elusive something, the intangible essence at the heart of leadership.

For that, we must look beyond accumulated knowledge or experience to the very source of wisdom or gut instinct—our powers of thought. Two books in this area are:

- *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* by Richard Bach. A lighthearted approach to a transformational philosophy. When we realize that the origin of what looks absolute is our own thoughts, we break the bonds of limitation.
- *The Speed Trap: How to Avoid the Frenzy of the Fast Lane* by Richard Bailey (psychologist). Speed is the hallmark of contemporary business life. Multitasking, instant messaging; stress is epidemic. To get relief, we don't have to chuck it all. There is a way to be productive and yet keep our bearings—to have days that are not only full but also fulfilling. Finally, for those who want to explore thought more deeply in its own right, read *The Missing Link* by Sydney Banks, a theologian who knows what he is talking about. Anybody can lead well. While management and leadership may never be easy, they are actually simple. So read the books, but also look within. ■

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