Leadership has been of interest to mankind for centuries, as reflected in the works of Confucius, Plato, or Machiavelli (Sorenson, 2000). Almost everybody has been attracted to the lives and personalities of special individuals like Gandhi, Napoleon or Hitler. Especially in the management field, the nature of leadership has been an object of study (Alves, Manz & Butterfield, 2004).

It has not been easy to establish what good leadership is. There have been almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept (Bass, 1990). Since the early days of leadership teaching, also the question of how the topic can be conveyed to business students has received attention. Scholars have argued, that management education needs to be extended beyond simple knowledge of management's functional areas (Porter & McKibben, 1988) and have advocated using fiction (Harris & Brown, 1989; Shaw & Locke, 1993), poetry (Vaill, 1981), or music (Powell & Veiga, 1986) to introduce students into the subject matter.

Also the use of the "classics of literature" to teach the principles of management and leadership has gained popularity (Puffer, 1991; Burke & Mayer, 1993). "On Leadership" by James March and Thierry Weil is one of those books interpreting the classics of literature from a management perspective. Taking the collective wisdom in the classic works of Western literature as basis, March and Weil use four main characters of these great works to discuss common dilemmas of leadership.

In the introduction the authors state, that the aim of their book is to provide a serious appreciation of leadership without glorifying it. In Chapter Two the position of the leader between public duties and private life is discussed. The chapter starts with a general overview of the subject and then discusses the position of William Shakespeare’s main characters in his play “Othello”. In many of his works, Shakespeare has been analyzing power, its acquisition, exercise and loss (Egan, 2000). Also in “Othello”, the concept of power and prime motivations for leadership action are discussed.

Leading change is one of the primary tasks of leadership. Chapter Three of the book deals with finding the balance between the efficient use of existing skills, and looking for new possibilities in organizational life to initiate change. The authors question whether average executives selected for their reliability can ever become creative leaders and claim, that it takes “genius”, such as that of “Saint Joan” to explore unknown paths.

In Chapter Four, the need for coherence in organizations is contrasted to the ambiguities of experience in organizational life. Taking Leo Tolstoy’s novel “War and Peace” as starting point, the authors show, that all of the people in the book are of an inconstant nature and operate in an inconsistent world. None of them is a hero, but all of them achieve a certain amount of wisdom through experience. A parallel is drawn to the novel, where the main characters of the play sacrifice the “sometimes artificial charms of life” (Page 57) to the sobriety of everyday organizational existence.

In Chapter Five, the relationship between gender, sex and leadership is discussed. The authors state, that organizational functioning feeds on sexual attitudes, imaginations and interpretations and that male leaders – which is the predominant gender on management levels – have to take the difficulties of
balancing these sentiments into account.

The last literature character of the book is Don Quixote, with the help of whom the authors discuss the concepts of imagination and vision, asking how these can flourish inside organizations. They discuss the situation of commitment and joy, which are qualities celebrated in the novel of Cervantes, and state that leadership can also be considered an arbitrary, joyful and unjustifiable commitment.

Leadership has been referred to both as a science as well as an art (Tsai & Weu, 2004). Chapter Seven is titled “Plumbing and Poetry”; where the former refers to the capacity to apply known techniques effectively; and the latter is reflected by a leader’s great actions and identity. The authors conclude, that a leader must both appreciate life, although he knows that all his efforts might be in vain; and be at the same time aware of reality.

Leadership consists of dilemmas and contradictory choices. On the one hand, it has a purpose driven dimension, based on values and ideals; on the other hand, leadership has to be objectives driven to assure stability in organizations (Antonakis et al., 2004). “On Leadership” is unusual in combining scholarly discussion with the great classical literature to reflect these dilemmas. The leadership lessons from the classics are still applicable today and this book offers a fresh and unconventional perspective on the whole discussion of what leadership is or ought to be.

A few remarks on what I missed in the book and which I believe would have enhanced its value need to be pointed out. The various characters discussed are well known heroes of classical dramas; however it would serve the purpose of the book better, had the novels and their main characters been introduced at the beginning of the book. A short summary of the play at the beginning of each chapter would give less well-read readers the opportunity to better understand the dilemmas faced by the characters. The authors also could have complemented the examples from classic literature with some examples of recent management approaches and practice examples from today’s companies. Examining corporations/real life cases where leaders have either applied leadership lessons with success or experienced problems for failing to do so would help especially business students establish a link between the characters in the literature and real life.

Another remark is on Chapter Five of the book. Whereas the whole theme of the book centers around classical drama, the purpose of adding a separate chapter on sexuality and leadership is not clear. The topic itself is of course a very interesting one, the question is just why it is added as a separate chapter in this book … and then even without relating it to a classical hero.

Many books on "leadership" are very abstract and readers don't really relate to the topics introduced. That is not the case with this book. The book is captivating, pleasant to read, lively, and instructive. As a whole, “On Leadership” offers a rich understanding of the art and dilemmas of leading.

I recommend this book to leaders fond of world literature and to university students who see the art of leadership as more than just the execution of management functions. In fact, “On Leadership” should become an obligatory piece of reading in business courses, as “the issues of leadership are not exclusively reserved to leadership only, but to life as a whole” (P. 1) and the common threads are worth careful thought and analysis.

References


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