

BOOK REVIEWS

Leadership BS: fixing workplaces and careers one truth at a time, by Jeffrey

Pfeffer, New York, Harper Collins, 2015, x + 259 pp., \$US14.99, ISBN 978-0-06-238316-7

This is a sobering book. It provides many insights into why work in organisations can, at times, be so miserable and why leaders, on whom we often pin our hopes and careers, frequently disappoint. Jeffrey Pfeffer is Professor of Organisational Psychology at the Stanford Graduate School of Business in the United States. He draws on his extensive knowledge of the dynamics of power in organisations to make a fundamental point, though one that is often ignored: don't become fixated on the way the world ought to be (this can be distracting and even misleading). Instead, focus on the way things are and use this as a basis to forge a better world. When it comes to leadership in organisations, we have a tendency and even a desire to be inspired by what comforts us, but this comfort does nothing to improve the way organisations are, let alone the way some people choose to behave in them.

Pfeffer's canvas for this book is a world characterised by numerous business failures, career derailments, terminations and toxic workplaces. An important element in many of these unfortunate scenarios is leadership, or the absence of it. Leadership is considered to be vital for organisational success, and especially for innovation. Pfeffer does not deny that good leadership is important – it is. He has his sights not so much on the abstract idea of leadership, but rather on the leadership industry. This he sees as an almost limitless number of books, articles, speeches, workshops, blogs, conferences, training sessions and corporate leadership development efforts. Despite a merciless output from this industry over decades, the leadership landscape has not improved and workplaces seem to be more toxic than ever. What explains this lack of progress? Pfeffer claims it is not just a coincidental discontinuity between feel-good leadership activities and too many toxic workplaces and disrupted careers. Nor is it a failure to develop better leaders. Rather, the problem is that all the talk about leadership actually makes things worse. The hype distracts from the hard truths of what organisations really are and how some organisational leaders exploit the opportunity to get what they want. For those not savvy enough to be aware of this, career disaster and disappointment are not far away.

The Introduction, titled 'Things are bad – Here's why', sets out Pfeffer's general approach. With a plethora of examples of failed leadership to draw upon (almost exclusively from the US corporate sector), Pfeffer observes that the daily news is filled with two ways to understand leadership failure. The first is the 'bad apple' theory – organisations have done a poor job in selecting leaders, business schools have failed to instil ethical leadership behaviour, and some leaders have developed questionable values. Most people find this theory plausible, but it fails to make sense of the pervasiveness of the problem and other instances when failure is systemic and cannot be attributed to a bad apple. A second theory explores the processes that produce leaders "who often behave differently from what most people might like or expect" (p.3). It is little wonder that Pfeffer favours the second approach. Drawing from social psychology, Pfeffer explores the actual traits that underpin the 'successful' leader. These processes are often at odds with the stories we like to tell about leaders and their traits. Herein lies the problem: the stories are comforting and inspiring, but they can circumvent effective diagnosis. Following the prescriptions of the feel-good leadership industry is not a certain path to organisational success. In many instances (but not all), doing the opposite produces a better result (p.32). This is startling stuff.

Core to Pfeffer's argument is that inspiration and fables about leadership cause problems and fix nothing. The reasons are various. First, the leadership industry delivers what employees

want (inspiration and hope since many people have soul-crushing jobs). This is not necessarily what they actually need. A second reason is that the leadership industry promotes its message with an almost religious fervour. It plays to the need for a sense of personal control and belief that there is a degree of fairness and purpose in the world of work. Since there is scant evidence of this fairness and purpose, the myths and stories about leadership are anxiously believed. The leadership industry relies on inaccuracy to sell its wares. Over time, the result is a degree of cynicism in those who sense the hypocrisy of the fables of effective leadership. Believing in the prescriptions of the leadership industry, is to adhere to a distorted view of reality. In a competitive and ruthless workplace, this can be damaging. An additional problem is that setting up leaders as having special attributes from which others can learn does not mean that regular people can benefit from learning. A third reason is that while the leadership industry thrives on inspiration, inspiration is a poor way to bring about change. Organisational change is unlikely to be effected by moving speeches and tales of other organisations. Pfeffer argues that change is often achieved in more mundane ways, such as defining what improvement means in terms of operational measures and holding people to account. A fourth reason is that sanctimonious talk about leadership makes some leaders over confident in their abilities. The result is that talk can replace action.

Pfeffer, however, does not leave us despondent. There are some precautions that can be taken. We need to be much more diligent about the leaders we promote. A lot more research should go into finding prospective leaders. Second, we need to stop chasing inspiration as a goal. Rather than the feel-good experience often sought by Human Resources managers and CEOs, logic and evidence should guide our approach. An understanding of the forces that produced the world we actually live in is a better bet than relying on inspiration.

In each successive chapter, Pfeffer tackles an attribute of leadership often associated with the ideals to which leaders might be expected to aspire: modesty, authenticity, truth, trust, and putting others before themselves. Using a mixture of commonsense, organisational psychology and evidence of less than perfect leaders, Pfeffer develops a convincing argument as to why relying on these apparent core attributes of leaders can be a pretty bad bet. Pfeffer acknowledges that these attributes are worthwhile, but they can leave a leader vulnerable in a competitive and often ruthless workplace. For example, modesty can be a positive trait if it reduces the temptation to take credit for the work of others (an otherwise destructive element in teams). But many business leaders have reached the top by doing just that. Narcissism is a common trait of business leaders. Likewise, authenticity would seem to be admirable, but speaking one's mind in the boardroom could end a career. Pfeffer quotes the comedian George Burns: "Sincerity - if you can fake that, you've got it made" (p. 90).

Pfeffer admits that some leaders have successfully incorporated truthfulness into their business cultures, but they are few and far between. Lying (adopting a different take on reality from that taken by others) is common in everyday life, and there can be positive and immediate pay-offs from lying. There are few sanctions to discourage lying in business. Often boards are willing to overlook stretching the truth in the light of a healthy bottom line, much as one overlooks the infidelities of a leading sportsman because of his achievements on the field. Pfeffer argues that if we focus too much on being morally offended by leaders, we end up pretending that common behaviours are really not common at all, and we miss the opportunity to understand the social world as it is (p.131). Trust, too, is targeted. Pfeffer argues that "[T]he simple fact is that maintaining trust requires honouring commitments, but commitments constrain" (p.150). Trust is rare in organisations and Pfeffer argues that workers need to understand why in order not to be fooled again (and again). Chapter 6, 'Why leaders "eat" first', presents a critique of the 'servant leadership' concept. Pfeffer presents some examples where leaders have put workers first, but these seem to be exceptions. Rather, executive and CEO salaries and payouts are not

diminishing. Pfeffer quotes a former student to make the point: “We live in an era of shared sacrifice. The employees sacrifice, and I share in the money they give up” (p.162).

Pfeffer argues that self-interest should be a guiding principle. It is foolish for the employee to think that the organisation will reward hard work. The reality is that companies will treat employees well only as long as they are useful. Companies are not inclined to reward past contributions (p.179). This is a hard lesson for workers who still have faith in leader beneficence. The reality is that reciprocity (while an important norm for bonding social groups) has much less currency in an organisational setting than in an interpersonal setting. There are few incentives to return favours in the workplace. Once a wage is paid, the brutal reality is that the employer owes the employee nothing. Self-reliance and resilience are essential for survival in the organisation – as is discarding belief in discredited leadership legends and stories.

Pfeffer anticipates that his message will be depressing for the ordinary worker. He mitigates this by arguing that relying on decades of books and lectures that peddle a false message would be more depressing. Pfeffer’s message here is that we need to develop strategies for facing the reality of organisational life. He advises the following: stop confusing the normative with the descriptive and focus more on what is; watch actions, not words; recognise that sometimes you have to behave badly to do good; know your business environment (to judge what will work and what will not); and get away from thinking about leadership in terms of oversimplified, good-bad stories. Be prepared to forgive, but remember. Look after yourself and do not get caught out a second time.

Pfeffer’s book is a welcome antidote to the fables and stories of the leadership industry. For academics working as teachers and researchers in universities, it gives some insight into the managerialist mindset that dominates the upper echelons of university management. Hoping for better university leadership just because it ought to be that way is another bad bet. Vice-Chancellor selection panels should not be too disappointed or even surprised if their choice is less than they hoped for. As Pfeffer observes, “...the remedy for the many leadership failures seems simple, and it is: to restore the broken connections, the linkages between behaviour and its consequences, words and actions, prescriptions and reality. But this task will not be easy. The disconnections serve many powerful interests, and they serve those interests extremely well” (p. 219).

Richard Joseph

John Curtin Institute of Public Policy, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

 rajoseph4342@hotmail.com

© 2017 Richard Joseph

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08109028.2017.1355151>



Public universities, managerialism and the value of higher education, by Rob Watts, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, xxii + 359 pp., £66.99, ISBN: 978-1-137-53598-6 (print) 978-1-137-53599-3 (online)

The university (as experienced by most senior academics) has changed dramatically in recent decades. This has induced a number of them/us (e.g. Readings, 1997; Docherty, 2011, 2015; Thornton, 2012, 2015; Brown and Carasso, 2013; McGettigan, 2013) to write critically about its transformation, not only to mourn what seems to be its irrevocable passing, but also to try to