

Book Review for 03/02/03 by Gary Jones

Title: "The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership"
Author: Steven B. Sample
Copyright: 2002
Publisher: Jossey-Bass
Length: 192 pages
Price: \$24.00
Reading time: 2 ½ hours
Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)
Overall rating: 2.5 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)
Subject Areas: Leadership; Management

There are a number of books on the subject of leadership on the book racks these days; "The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership" is a fresh and occasionally even hard-hitting addition to the field. Conventional wisdom has its place, author Steven Sample acknowledges, but a gifted leader knows when and how to break free from customary thinking.

The book covers the usual considerations of careful research, artful listening, circumspect delegation of authority and the importance of appointing talented and trusted lieutenants. But to these and other central tenets of leadership the author elaborates somewhat contrarian counsel—for example, knowing when to stop listening and take action.

Regarding delegation, Sample advocates "open communication with structured decision making." A good leader listens through many organizational channels, but acts through the chain of command.

During a military crisis in the early sixties, one story goes, the U.S. Secretary of Defense noticed on a display monitor that one naval warship in a formation had apparently moved out of position. The Secretary immediately asked the Navy chief of staff to order the captain to navigate his ship back into line. "Mr. Secretary," the admiral is said to have replied, "I will relieve the fleet commander if you like, but as long as he is in charge I'm not going to tell him how to direct the individual ships under his command."

No matter how talented and trusted your superior-or subordinates-the true leader must on occasion be prepared to go it alone. "One eye and seven nays," Abraham Lincoln once observed at cabinet meeting after his lone vote in favor of a proposal. "The ayes have it." Sample reads widely and the book is rich with pithy but illustrative anecdotes that underscore his argument for sometimes going against the grain.

And the author has earned his bona fides. With a Ph.D. in electrical engineering and now serving to acclaim as president of the University of Southern California, Dr. Sample has served on 14 corporate boards, was an uncommonly successful administrator at several

other universities, and has worked in the private sector (where, a publisher's note states, he holds patents in digital appliance controls that reside in an estimated 200 million home appliances).

Promotional book blurbs include recommendations from George Schultz, David Gergen, Warren Bennis, Michael Eisner, and Diane Feinstein. The book does suffer from a lack of an index. And occasionally, as when he takes some pot shots at the American media, Sample aims a little low from the hip. He also sometimes forgets that many of his readers will not be surrounded by a coterie of highly talented executives-in-waiting.

But despite minor weaknesses, "The Contrarian's Guide" lives up to its promotional encomiums. First, although the author's ethical stance is admittedly situational, one gets the strong sense of an honorable and principled leader telling a rough-and-tumble story "like it is." The metaphor that "a man must shoot his own [disabled] horse" for example, is based on a true childhood experience.

Second, beyond the author's credentials, Dr. Sample's ability to filter traditional science and technology perspectives through a liberal arts lens greatly broadens and enhances the span of his insights. References range from Shaw, Fitzgerald and London to Washington, Lincoln and Churchill, to Sun Tzu, Nietzsche and-especially-Machiavelli (a leader can be loved or feared, but not hated). But don't be put off by references to literary and academic heavyweights. Sample has consciously set out to produce a guide to leadership that is provocative yet practical, circumspect yet bold. And fortune favors the bold.

More available on the Web at:www.usc.edu/ext-relations/news_service/president/book_index.html

Gary H. Jones is an assistant professor of business communication in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. He worked in both the public and private sector in Los Angeles and earned a Ph.D. in Communication Theory and Research at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication. He does not know President Sample personally.