College of Business Book Review by Beverly Little

Title: "The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do"
Author: Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller
Publisher: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2004
Length: 115 pages
Price: $19.95
Reading time: 2 hours
Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)
Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

I discovered “The Secret” last October, when I attended the annual Blue Ridge Conference on Leadership. The keynote speaker, Mark Miller, delivered an entertaining and stimulating talk on Chick-fil-A’s leadership development framework, which is the basis for “The Secret,” written by Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller.

Anyone who has read Blanchard’s books will be familiar with the style. It reads like “The One Minute Manager”. The format is a series of conversations between a manager, Debbie, and the President of the company, Jeff, who is assigned as her mentor. Debbie begins their mentoring session with the question, “What is the secret of great leaders?” Over the following weeks, Jeff answers that question with a model based on the acronym SERVE.

See the future. Leaders must define the vision of where the group will be in the future. Only a compelling vision drives passion in followers. Jeff talks about the “Head’s down v. Head’s up” dilemma of implementation v. visioning. While the leader does not have to do all the Head’s Up work, he/she does have to ensure that it gets done.

Engage and develop others. Organizations must have the right people in the right positions fully engaged in pursuing the mission. Organizations must select employees carefully, because “fixing” a wrong choice is always expensive and often impossible. But selecting good people is not enough. Leaders must capture the hearts and minds of those people toward the vision by finding ways for people to succeed.

Reinvent continuously. Reinvention must take place on the personal level, the systems and processes level, and the structural level. The first has to do with life-long learning. The second addresses how to do the work better. The third states that structure should not be driving decisions, but is a tool for carrying out decisions.

Value results and relationships. In order to be successful, leaders must get results AND have followers. Many people can get results in the short-run simply by focusing on those results, but relationships drive long-term success.

Embody the values. If the leader consistently models the organizational values that are espoused, they will gain the followers’ trust. Everyone must assume the attitude that “If it is to be, it is up to me.” (p.100).
I find this framework useful, because often people assume that leadership is so ephemeral that, like beauty, we can only know it when we see it. How, then, do we develop leaders? This framework goes beyond the traditional task and/or relationship models to flesh out leadership as not just what one does, but what one is, as well. I appreciate the fact that a company has thought about leadership to this extent.

The book is an easy read, but I caution the reader not to miss the depth of what is being said because of the format. Some of the language approaches cute (e.g., “Walk the talk as opposed to stumble the mumble”) but the overall message is meaningful, nonetheless.

The authors tell us that leaders become great one day at a time throughout their lives and that “leaders always have a lot to think about” (p. 103). My parallel to this, as I tell students, is that leadership cannot be taught, but it can surely be learned.

The following links might be of interest to you.

http://www.bkconnection.com/static/blanchardPR.pdf
www.blueridgeleadership.com

This is the opinion of Beverly Little, Professor of Management at Western Carolina University, where she teaches Organizational Behavior, Introduction to Management, and Leadership. Her research interests include the impact of attitudes on behaviors and leader-follower interactions. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at www.wcu.edu/cob/.