Book Review: Leadership Is an Art

Leadership at its Essence

If you lead people, or aspire to, read Leadership Is an Art

Tim Stevenson

IN THE LAST 30 years, leadership has been one of the world’s most published topics. I’ve read dozens of books and articles on it. Though I’m always on the lookout for fresh and stimulating material on leadership, my list of really good books on the subject is pretty short.

As a coach recommending reading to clients, I have my favorites sorted into three levels, depending on the person’s experience, knowledge, and needs. There are books I really like but wouldn’t recommend for everybody.

But I believe every leader and aspiring leader should read Leadership Is an Art by Max De Pree. For those who aren’t avid, readers, let me say up front that it’s paperback, under 150 pages, and double-spaced. It’s short and easy to understand (but profound), full of good stories and illustrations. Very readable.

A leader who’s done it

One of the hazards of reading widely is the number of books that are written by smart, educated people who have never actually done the thing they’re writing about, and writers on leadership are some of the worst offenders. It’s a good idea to inquire if the author has ever truly led people successfully.

That’s one of the things that gives this book its power. Max De Pree has done it.

Born in 1924 to D. J. De Pree, founder of the Herman Miller company, Max followed
his brother Hugh as Chairman and CEO of the family business and led it to become the second-largest furniture manufacturer in the world. The excellence of the foundation laid by the De Pree family can still be seen today, fifteen years after Max’s retirement. This month, Herman Miller won Fortune magazine’s #1 “most admired” award for their industry for the 22nd time in 24 years. The company’s other awards, such as for “most innovative” or “best places to work,” are too numerous to name. Max De Pree’s personal influence has been a dominant reason for this record of excellence.

The philosophy behind the performance

Many speakers and writers put their spotlight on the fruit of leadership, meaning the individual leader’s behavior and results. Unfortunately, that approach often influences aspiring leaders to imitate the external characteristics of dominant characters. De Pree goes deeper and reveals that the root of those behaviors and results resides in the values and character of the leader him- or herself. It’s an inside-out approach. It’s about the ideals, beliefs, and commitments of the person. De Pree’s philosophy is real-world and healthy, and results in sustainable performance and organizational growth over the long-haul.

Let me share a couple of my favorite De Pree insights.

First, the opening lines of the early chapter entitled, “What Is Leadership?”:

The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two the leader must become a servant and debtor. (11)

“Defining reality” means teaching your people how to think: who we are; what we do; what we believe in; what we are committed to.

Second, I love this exchange:

... one of the analysts said to me, “What is one of the most difficult things that you personally need to work on?” He seemed surprised when I said, “The interception of entropy.” …

From a corporate management point of view, I choose to define it as meaning that everything has a tendency to deteriorate. One of the important things leaders need to learn is to recognize the signals of impending deterioration. (110-111)

The “interception of entropy” is a brilliant phrase, and a major insight for application. He then describes several examples of entropy.

I hope I can entice you to get this little book and read it carefully. Leadership Is an Art is well-worth your time and careful thought.

Quote Corner
From Leadership Is an Art

“The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers.” (12)

“Leaders owe the corporation rationality. Rationality gives reason and mutual understanding to programs and relationships. It gives visible order.” (16)

“Leaders are obligated to provide and maintain momentum.” (17)

“We are dedicated to quality. Quality … is a matter of truth. When we talk about quality, we are talking about quality of product and service. But we are also talking about quality of our relationships and the quality of our communications and the quality of our promises to each other.” (84)

“We owe each other truth and courtesy, though truth is sometimes a real constraint, and courtesy inconvenient. But make no mistake — these are the qualities that allow communication to educate and liberate us.” (105)