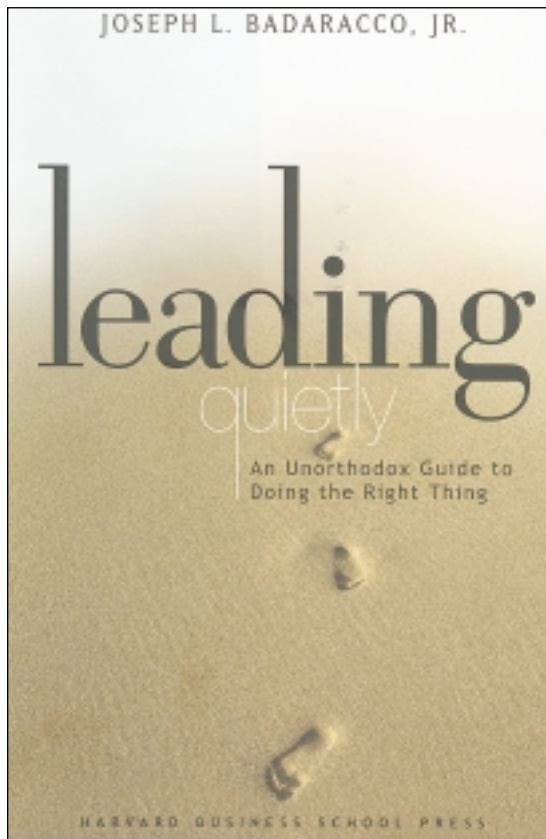


BOOKS



Leading Quietly

By Joseph L. Badaracco Jr.
Reviewed by Wendy Mack

The tag line for Joseph Badaracco's book *Leading Quietly* reads "an unorthodox guide to doing the right thing." This book lives up to its packaging. Anyone struggling with a dilemma at work, not just people who view themselves as leaders, should read this book. That's because the book's goal, according to Badaracco, is to offer a different perspective on what counts as responsible, effective leadership in organizations.

Badaracco begins with an interesting claim: The media and our textbooks provide a skewed picture of what makes a leader. When you picture a successful leader, who comes to mind? Odds are

it's someone like Jack Welch—a vivacious and aggressive personality—or a John Wayne-type, someone who takes dramatic action at a crucial time.

Badaracco debunks that myth. He says that the most effective leaders aren't high-profile men and women. Instead, he claims, "they move patiently, carefully, and incrementally. They do what is right—for their organizations, for the people around them, and for themselves—inconspicuously and without casualties."

His book, the result of a four-year study of quiet leadership, presents a series of case studies describing quiet

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leaders at work. Readers learn about a marketing representative who discourages doctors from prescribing drugs for inappropriate uses despite pressure to increase his sales, an army commander who tells her general about phony inspections even though it could damage her reputation, and a new bank branch president who figures out a way for several employees to keep their jobs and self-respect in the face of pressure to downsize.

What's unique about those leadership tales is that few people know what tribulations the protagonists endured. The leaders' jobs were threatened and their values challenged. But rather than quitting, they found a solution that enabled them to keep their jobs and still sleep at night.

How did those leaders do it? By possessing what Badaracco calls the "three quiet virtues": restraint, modesty, and tenacity. They were also skillful at using subtle techniques such as buying time, bending the rules, drilling down, and looking for the best returns on political capital.

Initially, I was appalled when I read the chapter on buying time. I couldn't believe Badaracco would recommend delaying action. Who isn't frustrated by the obstacles we encounter every day? Hasn't Jack Welch shown us that we need to take action?

Badaracco, however, argues that "When faced with a challenge, effective leaders rarely rush forward with 'The Answer.' Instead, they do something quite at odds with the conventional view of leadership. Instead of charging the hill, they often look for ways to beg, borrow, and steal a little time." Using case studies, Badaracco illustrates his point brilliantly. The new bank branch president under pressure to fire some of his employees found ways to dissipate that pressure by diverting the attention of the CEO. The diversion gave the president time to coach his staff. In the end, most of his

employees got to keep their jobs, and the ones who left did so voluntarily.

Badaracco explains that most managers play the organizational game of buying time. Though he acknowledges that using such tactics isn't the ideal way to solve problems, Badaracco suggests that their use is often necessary and effective: "Because many big problems can be resolved only by a long series of small efforts, quiet leadership, despite its seemingly slow pace, often turns out to be the quickest way to make an organization—and the world—a better place."

In each chapter, Badaracco accomplishes two primary objectives: 1) help readers recognize and learn from the quiet leaders around them, and 2) offer practical, responsible approaches to difficult, everyday challenges.

Take, for instance, the chapter on drilling down. Badaracco says, "Something important is missing from the stories of heroic leadership. Its absence simplifies these accounts and makes them more vivid and powerful, but does so at the cost of realism and relevance. The missing factor is the technological and bureaucratic complexity that pervades life and work today."

He goes on to explain that Abraham Lincoln didn't have legal experts review the Emancipation Proclamation. Helen Keller's teacher and caretaker, Ann Sullivan, didn't have to negotiate third-party reimbursement from an insurance company. Yet, in the organizational reality in which we operate, complexity is inevitable. Therefore, if you attempt to model yourself after Lincoln or Sullivan, you're doomed to a sense of failure. Instead, you must take the time to understand thoroughly the technology, forms, standards, and laws that govern our work. By drilling down into every aspect of a problem, you become an expert and gain the broader perspective needed to craft effective, workable compromises.

That's the key. The fact is that the



By Alice Waagen
I read fairly continuously throughout the day to keep abreast of the changes and challenges facing the world

of work. But bedtime is for indulgence reading; it's my time to read only those books that delight and entertain, and that expand my knowledge of human nature and human interaction.

Italo Calvino, author of *Invisible Cities* and *Difficult Loves*, is my favorite author. His short stories are brilliant gems of succinct writing that open windows to post-World War II Italy. Calvino's descriptions of human nature draw you into the stories and make you wonder how you'd react in his fictional situations.

My "day" reading right now is Robert Reich's *The Future of Success*. Reich, political economist and former U.S. Secretary of Labor, ponders the anomaly that the United States is in a period of unprecedented prosperity, yet Americans work longer and harder than ever before. What is the perversity of this new economy that keeps Americans on a work treadmill rather than reaping the benefits of prosperity and working less? Reich blames technology and the speed at which business operates, and he challenges readers to make intelligent choices concerning their livelihoods and their lives. Something to consider.

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most effective leaders are the ones who negotiate compromise. On the one hand, in the American culture, people tend to believe that they should never compromise their values. On the other, if people quit or try to take some dramatic action each time their values are compromised, they run the risk of not making a difference at all. Each of the case studies in *Leading Quietly* illustrates that modest, subtle, and more tenacious actions often have a greater impact.

Badaracco admits that none of the stories he includes will make headlines or be included in history books. Yet, he argues, all of them matter: “Each shows how—day after day, through countless, small, often unseen efforts—quiet leaders make the world a better place.”

My own review of the recent literature on human resources, training, and organization development shows that leadership is on our minds. We’re trying to figure out who the best leaders are and why, and how to develop the next generation of executives to lead our organizations. Some writers argue that we’re paying attention to the wrong things. Perhaps this book will help us pay attention to what is right.

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