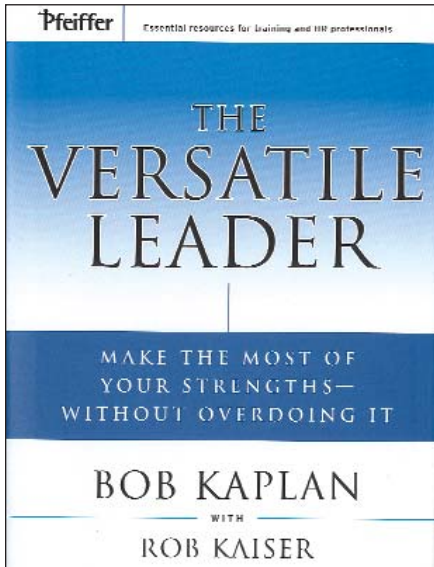


Versatile Leaders Offer Unique Balance



The Versatile Leader: Make the Most of Your Strengths—Without Overdoing It

By Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser
Reviewed by Suneeta Mishra



THE FIRST THING that struck me about this book is its unusual title. Frankly, I had never heard of a versatile leader, and that compelled me to read the book. In hindsight, I now realize that the title was part of a bigger plan.

Authors Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser stumbled upon this path-breaking concept, which they call “versatility in leadership,” during their years of research on senior leaders, including CEOs. Most contemporary theories of leadership acknowledge that leaders must possess a set of traits and skills to be effective. It is

also a foregone conclusion that if you possess those skills and traits, then you are an effective leader. However, not much attention was given to the consequence of taking a well-established, enabling behavioral trait to the extreme. This is the premise on which the authors build their theory.

The authors use the term “versatility” to denote an absence of imbalance that leads to higher performance levels. They define pairs of aptitudes, which complement each other in a yin and yang sense. Most leaders, when presented with two opposing approaches—for example, strategic and operational—have a natural tendency to favor one over the other. This gives rise to “lopsidedness,” which can be detrimental to their effectiveness as a leader. According to the authors, versatile leaders can continually adjust and balance those opposing dimensions by applying the right blend of approaches to the right degree—depending on the prevailing circumstances—to perform at a more effective level. To utilize these paired capabilities efficiently, the leader must be, or must learn to be, impartial to the opposing dimensions as well as aware of how she behaves with respect to each pair.

The book is neatly divided into three main sections. The first part sets the theoretical premise of the concept of versatility. Using a tool called Leadership Versatility Index that is designed to measure such imbalances, the authors demonstrate the positive correlation between high performance leadership levels and versatility and balance. The challenge for the versatile leader is to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and retain the ability to function.

The second section deals with the two dual leadership dimensions that are critical to a leader’s effectiveness, namely forceful vs. enabling and strategic vs. operational. The authors also delve deeper

Reads for Leaders

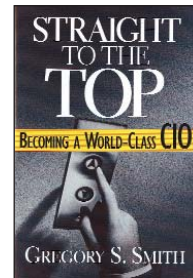
T+D editors examine books that deal with essential skills for leaders and executives.

Straight to the Top:

Becoming a World-Class CIO

By Gregory S. Smith

(John Wiley & Sons, April 2006, \$34.95)



This book caters to dreamers, not office-holders. Smith describes the skills needed to succeed, what to expect from an interview, and how to navigate interoffice politics.

Smith is CIO of the World Wildlife Fund, and the book contains several flattering salutes to his current employer. But, there are few anecdotes detailing how he was able to deliver improved performance. This is unfortunate, given that he became CIO of the organization in late 2001 when an economic downturn forced many employers to slash personnel budgets.

Some advice is so generic that it could be applied to anyone. Smith tells CIOs to “be responsive to email requests and voice mails. Give honest and factual answers to questions, even if they may be painful to deliver.” Any decision maker should be expected to do as much.

—Michael Laff

Head, Heart & Guts: How the World’s Best Companies Develop Complete Leaders

By David L. Dotlich, Peter C. Cairo and Stephen H. Rhinesmith

(Jossey-Bass, June 2006, \$27.95)

HEAD, HEART & GUTS

How the World’s Best Companies Develop Complete Leaders

DAVID L. DOTLICH, PETER C. CAIRO & STEPHEN H. RHINESMITH

Complex times require complex leaders. In an environment of moral complexity and rapid shifts in attitude, social and

Most leaders, when presented with two opposing approaches—for example, strategic and operational—have a natural tendency to favor one over the other. This gives rise to “lopsidedness,” which can be detrimental to their effectiveness as a leader.

and identify behaviors of those dimensions. For example, they list actions such as “takes charge,” “declares,” and “pushes” under the forceful dimension.

The third section is largely prescriptive and gives suggestions on how to overcome the lopsidedness of the conflicting dimensions. The authors identify a number of factors, such as uneven skill development and fear of inadequacy that, when combined with the natural human tendency to polarize issues, causes imbalance. In their discussion of how leaders can reduce lopsidedness, the authors present the multiversatile leader who confidently balances all the four leadership dimensions.

The authors’ theoretical concepts are well presented, although at times they tend to be rather academic in their tone. Leaders and CEOs—presented as case studies to illustrate the impact of lopsidedness of dual leadership dimensions—provide a practical context to the theories. As a practicing manager, I could actually relate to the concept and reflect on the authors’ notion that a virtue used in excess corrupts. I found myself analyzing the lopsidedness of some leaders with whom I had come in contact with during my work life. Looking back, I could see how their lopsidedness did indeed contribute to an unbalanced leadership and, at times, interfered with effectiveness.

After reading the book, I got the impression that the concept the authors are trying to promote is a balanced approach to leadership. I personally thought that the term “versatility” (used in the restrictive sense by the authors) was not forceful enough to denote the radically new approach that they advocate. But I also got the feeling that the choice of that word was probably deliberate. In keeping with

the nature of their theory, versatility does not come off as extreme and gels well with the authors’ yin and yang sense of balance.

The accompanying research tools and graphs in the book were distracting and gave me the impression that the authors were trying hard to establish credibility for their findings. In some sections, I felt that the book was getting too technical and would probably not hold the interest of readers who are not involved in training and development or HR professions.

The Versatile Leader is, however, a wonderful resource for leadership specialists and offers a unique theory of balancing extreme traits for leaders to be effective. As a path-breaking research concept, I give it full marks. However, readers need further research into why some leaders can evolve into multiversatile leaders more easily than others. Regardless, the book is a good starting point and offers a totally new way of thinking with respect to leadership dimensions. So, I give it three full cups of coffee.

The Versatile Leader: Make the Most of Your Strengths—Without Overdoing It, by Bob Kaplan and Rob Kaiser. Pfeiffer: San Francisco. 272 pp. \$40

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political circumstances, economic conditions, and technology, leaders must be capable of using their head, heart, and guts as situations demand. Using your head, heart, and guts to lead others is not a new concept. It has been around for a long time as illustrated through the scarecrow, tin man, and cowardly lion in the 1939 movie, *The Wizard of Oz*.

This book reveals the three most important leadership capabilities—to implement, empathize, and take risks—and explains how to put them into action.

According to the authors, there needs to be a fresh perspective on leadership and a new approach to leadership development. Without a new way to view leadership development, organizations would continue to churn out leaders who rely heavily on cognitive skills, but are ill-equipped to deal with the complex issues of today’s world.

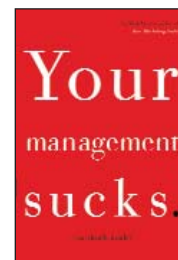
—Paula Ketter

Your Management Sucks:

Why You Have to Declare War on Yourself... and Your Business

By Mark Stevens

(Crown Business, June 2006, \$25)



Bestselling author Mark Stevens writes in his introduction: “No business has ever grown over time by allowing ideas and execution to remain in harmony. Neither has any

manager ever grown over the years by seeking and indulging in tranquility.” Those statements succinctly illustrate his view that complacency and conventional thinking keep organizations and their managers from being their best.

An effective leader, says Stevens, strives to be herself. She doesn’t try to emulate someone else’s philosophies. Instead, she develops her own methods for driving business growth. She also leverages her “signature trait” to differentiate herself from the rest.

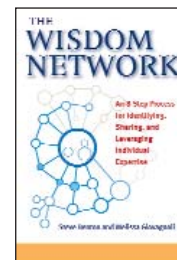
Stevens says readers must “declare war” on themselves. This means “rejecting what is and aspiring to what can be.”

In addition, Stevens encourages readers to challenge conventional thinking. He debunks common business myths such as team-player success and living a balanced life. He also cites examples of how doing business as usual dooms managers to repeat past failures.

—Josephine Rossi

The Wisdom Network: An 8-Step Process for Identifying, Sharing, and Leveraging Individual Expertise

By Steve Benton and Melissa Giovagnoli
(AMACOM, June 2006, \$27.95)



If you have to ask what a Wisdom Network is—and I did—then you may not know that your own organization is probably rife with them. The term is yet another

way of describing the collection of groups that function to get things done; even if those groups do not show up on a company’s organization chart.

The authors do a credible job describing the value of identifying and then exploiting these networks, but their presentation is just a bit stilted. Long passages are only broken up by numbered lists and bullet items.

That is not to say that the subject matter, or the obvious expertise the authors bring to the subject, are not worth the time and effort required to read this book. And, a Current State Questionnaire in chapter 10 looks like it would be useful in creating a baseline to examine your company’s own networking health. The authors admit that even this tool will yield different results from one company to another. But, they write, “There is great value in being able to compare ... the knowledge behavior of your networks, as such comparisons will yield great insight in how to make them better.”

—Rex Davenport