

White, B. J., & Prywes, Y. (2007). *The nature of leadership: Reptiles, mammals, and the challenge of becoming a great leader*. New York, NY: American Management Association.

Reviewed by Jay Kahn

Introduction

The Nature of Leadership: Reptiles, Mammals, and the Challenge of Becoming a Great Leader is authored by David White and graduate student Yaron Prywes. White has held Presidential and Dean posts at some of the nations largest public universities, as well as executive positions at large private companies and uses his experiences to put his theories of leadership in context for readers. The purpose of the book is to show readers that anyone can become a leader, and to help those who are already leaders become Great Leaders. White's Leadership Pyramid is the central model that appears throughout the text. It is grounded (although White does not say it explicitly) in many respected leadership theories. In order to achieve the pinnacle of The Leadership Pyramid, individuals must attain a basic skill set, work to harness both reptilian and mammalian leadership abilities, and then fulfill the requirements of being a Great Leader. While the authors indicate that the book is for everyone, even individuals with little formal leadership experience, they explicitly state that it is best for those already holding leadership positions. The Leadership Pyramid model is clearly grounded in theory and is straightforward. It could easily serve as a launching point for further study, however it tends to over simplify complex leadership themes. The text achieves its goal of laying out a plan for individual to advance to becoming Great Leaders by presenting a model grounded in established theory that is easy to understand.

Theoretical Frame Work

The Nature of Leadership is grounded in several different leadership theories, although the authors do not explicitly state this. The first of these theories is Trait Leadership. Although the book intends to inspire readers to believe that anyone can be a leader, White established "Foundational Requirements" such as abilities like intelligence, a competitive spirit, and character, which could all be considered innate qualities. White also calls upon the Skills Approach Theory to leadership as both reptilian and mammalian leadership require specific abilities relating to technical, human, and conceptual skills. Given that such a large portion of The Leadership Pyramid deals with the idea of task (reptilian) versus relational (mammalian) leadership behaviors, it is easy to see influences from the Style Approach Theory of leadership as well. Throughout the text White advocates that Great Leaders are able to clearly relay tasks to their organization and ensure efficiency (reptilian), but also inspire and form relationships (mammalian), which falls within the high directive/high supportive "coaching" approach to leadership advocated by the Situational Approach Theory. The overall theme of the text, that individuals can work their way up The Leadership Pyramid, is very much in tune with Transformational Leadership Theory. The ultimate goal of transforming oneself into a Great Leader is also inline with Authentic Leadership Theory. The Leadership Pyramid is developmental as leaders progress through it over time and requires both focus on the leader's individual self (intrapersonal) and with their interaction of their organization or team (interpersonal).

While the main ideas in the book can be traced to established theory it is unclear whether they guided the formation of The Leadership Pyramid model or the writing of the text. White establishes his credibility on the topic much more in personal experience rather than research, especially in comparison to other leadership texts. While the book is clearly geared more towards those in business, the ideas are straightforward and could also be applied to student leadership development.

Summary - Chapter Annotations

Chapter 1

The authors begin with a call to action for their readers that will continue throughout the text. Anyone can become a leader; if you are already one, you can be better; if you are already a good leader you can become a great one. It is the purpose of the chapter and the book to show the reader how to position oneself in a way to reach the ultimate goal of becoming a Great Leader. The book is not just meant for individuals looking to become leaders, but also those responsible for evaluating and developing them. A great leader must be analytical (reptile) and interpersonal (mammal); it is just as important to be decisive and rational as it is to be caring and nurturing. According to White in chapter one, a good leader will be both a mammal and a reptile. They will set goals, recruit great people, and bring energy, enthusiasm, and motivation to the team. Great Leaders achieve change that is important to the organization. White outlines the three important steps that he says will be useful throughout the book. The first is to distinguish between the order and control foundations of management and the fundamentals of leadership (achieving goals and making change). The second step is to answer two key questions: Can I really develop myself as a leader? And will I have the chance to serve as one? It is at this point in the chapter that White states specifically, that the book is for individuals in a formal leadership position, directly contradicting a previous statement. The third step is to challenge yourself to climb the Leadership Pyramid, a concept he develops further in chapter three. The Leadership Pyramid represents the challenge of using leadership in varying situations over the course of a career. The authors acknowledge difficulty in using the lessons in his book in actual application and provide three tips for doing so. First, seek out feedback and be open to criticism. Second, find a great organization and person to work for, but also understand you can learn from bad leadership. Lastly, learn as much as possible about “the leadership game,” which is White’s expression for the variety of experiences and situations one can possibly encounter in their leadership position.

Chapter 2

The authors detail the reptile and mammal dichotomy further in chapter two. White acknowledges that dichotomies are essentially half-truths. They are useful and can help structure our thought, but they are also incomplete. The theory itself was formed through his interactions as the dean of a business school. White noticed that faculty trained in business viewed firms as economic entities and the people within them as tools for profit, whereas the social sciences faculty saw companies as human entities. The economics faculty viewed the humanities faculty as “soft or lightweight” and the humanities faculty thought the economists were “out of touch, humorless, and overly theoretical.” Reptiles (based on the economics faculty) are categorized as detached, analytical, quantitative, independent, adversarial, and focused on control. Mammals (based on the humanities faculty) are typically engaging, emotional, qualitative, cooperative, interdependent, trusting, and value community. It is clear that being a reptile is not better than

being a mammal or vice versa. Reptiles are needed for task oriented work as much as mammals are needed to maintain community. Reptiles can help make up for negligence and lead in a competitive, cutthroat environment. Mammals thrive with organizations where inspiration and support are needed. Successful organizations and leaders have a mixture of reptilian and mammalian traits.

Chapter 3

The goal of The Leadership Pyramid is similar to that of the book; develop your strengths, improve on your weaknesses, and strive for excellence in leadership. All of this is done with four main items. The top of the pyramid consists of Great Leadership Requirements. Great Leaders teach others to lead, represent a “synergy of the best Mammalian and Reptilian qualities,” and possess the ability to implement change. Below that are the Reptilian Requirements and Mammalian Requirements on equal footing that were discussed in the previous chapter. The base of the pyramid is the Foundational Requirements, which are also the focus of chapter three. White believes that every leadership issue can be categorized into one of the three base categories. The first category is ability. A person must have the intelligence, knowledge, experience, and personal capacity to succeed within their job. The second foundational requirement is strength. A leader must be determined, have a competitive spirit, and be able to command respect from those they lead. The third foundation is character, which White simplifies to being a high integrity leader. The authors use character and integrity synonymously. Integrity in leadership can be achieved through four functions; never knowingly violating laws, always being honest, keeping commitments, and avoiding conflicts of interest. By fulfilling the needs of leadership in ability, strength, and character, leaders have the foundational base to work on specific leadership traits characterized as reptilian or mammalian in later chapters.

Chapter 4

White expands on his Leadership Pyramid to the development of Reptilian Excellence. Leaders need to be tough, competitive, and collected in a variety of situations. The authors lay out a number of reasons why reptilian leaders must be tough. First, toughness gives organizations a chance to survive in a competitive environment. Toughness also sets the tone of the organization from the top. If people know what the expectations are from their leader and also that they will be held accountable to meet those expectations, an organization will be more successful. The third reason toughness is required, is that it helps a leader establish and maintain the credibility and authority that is associated with their position. A leader must be able to set deadlines, be insistent, and demand the best out of his/her team. Finally, toughness is a component of strong management, which can be just as important as good leadership.

Toughness in leadership can mean a number of different things. Mental toughness is associated with realism and a competitive spirit. To be a tough leader also means being emotionally tough. You need to be able to respect people and have them respect you in the day to day function of your job, but also be able to put your popularity second. A tough leader must also be managerially tough in that they must be detail oriented, measure performance, and make economical decisions.

In order to achieve Reptilian Excellence, leaders need a number of capabilities. The first, is to understand financial matters, especially basic accounting. Reptilian leaders must set the bar high, but also make sure that expectations don't slip. The third capability a reptilian leader must

have is the ability to deal with bullies, individuals who have a problem with the leader's power and bring an organization down. Leaders must be able to serve as "The Judge and Jury" regarding violations of policy and integrity. They may also have to implement cutting measures, such as lowering budgets, decreasing staff, etc. Finally, a reptilian leader has to excel at "zero-sum games," where someone wins and someone loses in business situations.

Chapter 5

The authors make it clear that reptilian leadership is required for organizations to survive in competitive environments, but only mammalian leadership can help organizations change and thrive. The main component of mammalian leadership is the ability to nurture. Being mammalian does not mean "soft or sappy" the same way being tough in reptilian leadership isn't simply being mean. Great Leaders are able to help people and their organizations grow and develop. A mammalian leader should adopt three attitudes/practices, all of which are easily understandable and straightforward. First, a nurturing leader should treat all people with respect and dignity. Second, they should be able to see the potential within people and be able to develop it. Finally, a great mammalian leader makes the function and success of the organization about the people, not him/herself.

These practices require the five capabilities of Mammalian Excellence. The first capability is The Dream Deal, which deals with the recruitment and motivation of team members. Leaders should show people that their dreams could come true by joining and working with their organization. The second capability is known as The Leadership Triad, which consists of stretching, supporting, and connecting. A leader needs to stretch the organization by challenging it and setting high expectations, support the team as a group and individuals to achieve the challenge, and a leader must connect team members with one another and resources in order to coordinate progress. The third capability of mammalian leadership is being an equally effective communicator and listener. Remembering that good ideas can come from anywhere is the fourth capability, and the last capability is maintaining a sense of humor and irony in all situations. By combining these capabilities and reptilian leadership, individuals can begin to work towards the pinnacle of The Leadership Pyramid, Great Leader Requirements.

Chapter 6

A Great Leader is an individual who is capable of achieving important, consequential change. The authors believe there are five qualities associated with being a Great Leader. First, all Great Leaders are innovative. They are original thinkers that are guided by powerful ideas. The second quality is the ability to take risks. Great Leaders do not always have a perfect track record, but they are often successful and their risks are informed and calculated. Third, Great Leaders can spot talent, and they want to bring the best talent into their organization. Some leaders are afraid or threatened by talented people, but Great Leaders enlist them in a common cause. They also have a Helicopter View of their team. They have a perspective that rises above conflict and are able to see the entire situation in context and offer this perspective to their team. Finally, Great Leaders have what White calls "The Sparkle Factor." While this can mean many things, it is essentially the presence that Great Leaders have that allows them to gain the trust, respect, and positional power associated with their standing.

The authors stress that thinking about something is not enough and that leaders must work to take ideas and convert them to consequential change. In leading for innovation Great Leaders must do four things. Expect the change, energize it, start and shape the change, then

nurture and protect it. This can be done with what White calls “The Presumption of Yes.” Every plausible idea should be considered and tested. If the idea works, use it to create change in the organization that continues long after the leader has left. However, the context in which the change occurs is important and situations do matter. Situations that create challenge are more likely to lead to consequential change.

Chapter 7

The final chapter is a call to action for readers to accept the challenge of becoming a Great Leader. White makes it clear that accepting this challenge and wanting to be a Great Leader is not equivalent to actually becoming one. To do this, the authors offer three final points of advice. The first is to develop oneself through The Leadership Pyramid. Great Leaders must recognize their natural bias towards reptilian or mammalian leadership and seek vertical development to improve upon their strengths and spiral development to build upon weaknesses. White has included a survey in the appendix to help leaders assess their natural bias. Second, Great Leaders should strive for positive endings. When the time comes, move on from your leadership positions gracefully, help with the transition, and make sure you don’t ever hold a position for too long. Finally, Great Leaders must be resilient. When leaders face a failure, disappointment, or difficult time it is important that they take the experience and learn from it. Resilience is also the courage to stand by your convictions or admit you are wrong in the face of overwhelming evidence. In reference to one of his own failures and resilience, White wrote that overcoming these adversities is important because we don’t always know what is best for ourselves, and great things can come out of these difficult times.

Target Audience

The Nature of Leadership: Reptiles, Mammals, and the Challenge of Becoming a Great Leader is best suited for business professionals or individuals who hold a formal leadership position. White has served as an executive in the manufacturing industry, as the dean of a large business school, and has a PhD in Management. As most of his professional experience is based in business, the majority of the examples he uses throughout the text are as well, and therefore it is easier for someone in that field to relate to the theories that are presented. However, White intended that all leaders could use the book and it is written in a manner that is easy to understand and with lessons that could be applied to a variety of fields.

Use of Book In Student Leadership Development Practice

The model that guides the formation of the text, The Leadership Pyramid, could serve as a positive foundation for a Student Leadership Development module. The model provides an overview of positive leadership qualities that are applicable to student leaders and provides steps that students can work towards with the ultimate goal of becoming a Great Leader. The Leadership Pyramid would be most applicable with students who are already holding a leadership position as it deals with both the individual leader as well as the leader’s interaction and impact on the group.

There are key lessons that are directly applicable to student leaders. The idea of having both reptilian and mammalian qualities is an important lesson that could help students expand their skill set and is presented in a way that is easy to understand. The assessment measures in the appendix would be useful in evaluating a starting point for a

workshop based on vertical and spiral development centered on the reptile and mammal portions of The Leadership Pyramid. The authors also stress that Great Leaders create consequential change in their organization that lasts long after the leader is gone. This lesson is two fold for students. First, it encompasses many of the items that student leaders struggle with related to their organization, such as, recruiting great members, motivating a team, etc. Also, by working to become a Great Leader, students are striving to sustain change in an organization that transitions between leaders often, as students are usually in their executive positions for a short amount of time.

Critique

Strengths

The purpose of White and Prywes' text was to provide a road map for individuals to work towards becoming Great Leaders. While there are some weaknesses in their theory and model, as a whole, *The Nature of Leadership: Reptiles, Mammals, and the Challenge of Becoming a Great Leader* accomplished this goal. One of the strengths of the book is the straightforwardness of The Leadership Pyramid. The authors do not get enamored with formal vocabulary, and the terms that they used were simple and well defined. For example, Authentic Leadership Theory is essentially summarized within the straightforward definition of "Sparkle Factor." Most readers will be able to understand the concepts related to The Leadership Pyramid and be able to work towards applying the lessons in their own leadership work. With this in mind, White provides numerous examples to illustrate the formal concepts of the model.

White's dichotomy of reptilian versus mammalian traits is unique, and illustrates an important point very well. It is easy for readers to see the difference between the two leadership tendencies and in turn identify where their own preferences lie. The instruments included with the book are excellent evaluation tools. While reptilian qualities (task orientation, rationality, decisiveness) and mammalian qualities (being relational, compassionate, and nurturing) are clearly separated there is an importance placed on finding a balance. This is an essential lesson in becoming a well-rounded leader that is articulated clearly throughout the book.

White and Prywes also do an excellent job of encouraging leaders to always take the next step in their leadership development to the ultimate idea that Great Leaders impact their organization through consequential change. As readers become comfortable with each level of The Leadership Pyramid they are challenged to evolve through both vertical and spiral development, which is intended to both improve upon leaders' strengths and develop their weaknesses. By encouraging consequential change, leaders are forced to look beyond surface level initiatives and consider what really makes them impactful to their team and how a successful organization is truly measured. By doing this, White imparts a valuable lesson to all leaders, and especially to students who are still developing their leadership style: success is measured by long term results, regardless of how good a plan is or how positive a leader's intentions were.

Weaknesses

While the broad scope of the book makes it easy to read and understand, at times The Leadership Pyramid model and provided examples appear over simplified. While the traits and capabilities of a Great Leader are detailed, the examples used surround

extraordinary circumstances, leaving readers to wonder what the actions of a Great Leader look like in daily practice. This is especially true in relation to the use of the book within student leadership development. Students studying formal leadership theory could easily be put off by the over simplification of complex leadership themes. While it is intended for all leaders, it is obviously geared towards business professionals or those that already hold a leadership position. While the language is broad and can be applied to a variety of circumstances, this could be a difficult connection for some students to make.

As the text has a business theme, the authors often dealt with the concept of management. White was careful to distinguish between leadership and management as two distinct concepts, but much of his model (notably the chapter on Reptilian Excellence) requires leaders to have a grasp on management techniques in order to reach the next level of The Leadership Pyramid. Due to this, there is a heavy emphasis on experience and learning from these leadership experiences. Therefore, it would be difficult for someone who isn't already serving in a formal leadership position to apply some of these lessons.

Finally, there is a noticeable inconsistency in relation to White's statement that anybody can become a leader, as the Foundational Requirements of The Leadership Pyramid are largely based on innate qualities. While more experiences can be found, the authors do not explicitly state how ability, strength, and character can be developed (or if they can at all) as they do for the other sections of The Leadership Pyramid. This can be off putting for readers, especially students, and furthers the idea that this book is best suited for individuals already holding a leadership position.

Recommendation

I would recommend *The Nature of Leadership: Reptiles, Mammals, and the Challenge of Becoming a Great Leader* to students interested in their continual development as leaders, especially those who have a formal leadership position, or to those just starting their study of leadership theory. The provided theories and models, while oversimplified at times, provide an excellent overview of leadership practices. By building a set of both reptilian and mammalian tendencies, students create a foundation for the requirements of Great Leadership. The progression of The Leadership Pyramid can provide structure in the development of a well-rounded leadership style with the goal of creating consequential change, especially in students who already hold a formal leadership position and can build upon past experiences.

Reviewer

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