Ever since King Solomon offered to bisect that baby, it's been clear that effective executive decision-making requires the incumbent to possess both wisdom and moral authority. However, even with the current recession firmly in place, there simply aren't that many ex-monarchs of a similar caliber out there job-hunting just now. (And even if there were, then what with the price of thrones, red carpeting, and palace flunkies these days, they would be hard to sell as potential CEO candidates to any half-decent board of directors.) Nonetheless, Silicon Valley has done an excellent job of generating its own royal pretenders: Steve Jobs, Larry Ellison, and Scott McNealy, to name but three. Like modern-day royalty, these are personalities that get to live life in the full glare of the media spotlight. And over time, they've come to personify what a CEO surely has to be, right?

Wrong. The reality is -- and must be -- that the vast majority of businesses operate perfectly well, thank-you-very-much, without superstars. As the author of this new book puts it, "Quiet leadership is what moves and changes the world."

A perfectly reasonable premise, but, as it turns out, only one aspect of what this book sets out to achieve. *Leading Quietly* is just as concerned with the moral dimension of leadership as it is with celebrating the "unsung heroes" of management. Hardly surprising, really, given that Joseph Badaracco is presently the John Shad Professor of Business Ethics at Harvard Business School.

As he points out, history has often shown us that "just following the rules" can generate at least as great a moral vacuum as completely breaking them would do. In practice, of course, the truly capable manager usually operates somewhere in the *terra incognita* that lies between those two extremes, but nowhere is that unexplored land rockier and more dangerous than when it comes to addressing the ethical problems that litter that landscape. This is a subject all too rarely discussed, so it's in
that territory that this book potentially has something significant to offer.

As the author himself readily admits, this work is more like an extended essay than a prescriptive handbook, and it is best read as such. Use it as a means to catalyze your own thoughts and reflections on the topics it raises, and the book will serve a useful purpose. Come to it expecting a "Ten easy steps to being a better manager" approach, and you'll end up disappointed.

**Realism is Paramount**

One of the book's main thrusts is that taking a realistic -- in contrast to an idealistic -- world-view still can lead to decision-making that is both morally responsible and extremely effective. The chapter headings themselves -- such as "Don't Kid Yourself," "Buy a Little Time," and "Craft a Compromise" -- do a pretty adequate job of conveying this intent. Whether you are leading quietly or with a megaphone clamped to your lips, this is all sensible stuff.

In the "Don't Kid Yourself" chapter, for example, Badaracco offers four guiding principles to help managers ensure they maintain a realistic view of the world (and themselves), namely:

- You don't know everything.
- You will be surprised.
- Keep an eye on the insiders.
- Trust, but cut the cards.

Again, nothing especially new or innovative here, but this book does remind us that managers -- even CEO superstars like Jobs et al.-- are human beings with the frailties, insecurities, and capacity for making mistakes that we all possess. Moreover, whatever their own unique personal strengths, they still have to manage organizations that are themselves full of people exhibiting every vice and virtue known to man. As Kant succinctly put it, "From the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made."

Which leads us to another chapter worth exploring here: "Trust Mixed Motives." At first glance, this seems a little contradictory: Often, we're inclined to mistrust people who operate in such a way. Convention has it that great leaders throughout history have always been purely altruistic and demonstrated nothing but total adherence to the noble cause in which they were engaged. This is, of course, nonsense. As Professor Badaracco points out, "At best, these stories provide inspiration and guidance. At worst, they offer greeting card sentimentality in place of realism about why people do what they do. They also tell people with mixed or complicated motives that they may be too selfish, divided or confused to be 'real' leaders." How true.

Nevertheless, let's not dismiss the fact that true leaders are different along at least one dimension: They have a strong bias for directed action.
The author makes three key points that, to my mind, provide a good perspective on the relationship between action and motivation.

- First, he says, leaders should have a bias for action, but then he rightly cautions, "... don't get bogged down in the morass of motives," the point being that trying to fully understand all of the psychological drivers involved can lead to substituting endless navel-gazing for making real progress.

- Second, he urges us to take heart: Mixed or complicated motives don't disqualify you from being leadership material.

- Third, he assures us that internal conflict is OK and might be telling us something important -- so pay attention!

Without doing a précis of the entire book, I find one other point Professor Badaracco makes worthy of mention in this review: "Buy a little time." Again, the popular image of a successful leader promotes the notion that constant, rapid, and emphatic decision-making is mandatory, and that it always results in optimal outcomes. Alas, the reality in modern business is that managers too often commit the cardinal sin of hastening to a quick answer in lieu of finding a way to "right-time" the decision-making process -- to create a breathing space within which further information gathering and investigation can take place in order, ultimately, to arrive at a better decision.

**Strengths and Weaknesses**

Succeeding chapters address issues such as the crucial role of political capital within a business context, the importance of compromise, how to escalate issues effectively and -- a tricky one, this -- how to bend the rules when, as the British say, "needs must."

All of these areas are explored via a number of well-written case studies that help to get the reader thinking about the complex, ethical issues raised and subsequently explored. The good professor writes eloquently but simply, drawing from a wide range of sources and personal experience. (Where else might you find references ranging from Aristotle to Dave Barry by way of Kierkegaard, all within a few pages of each other?)

In summary, on a scale of five, this book deserves a solid three. Weaknesses? The first half reads better than the second (though it's difficult to say precisely why), and more discussion on the differences between leaders and managers would have been welcome. One caution: There's a strong danger that having (mis)read this book, you'll find new and interesting ways to justify your own weaknesses -- so beware!

Strengths? The case studies are very well presented and drawn from a wide range of businesses, the writing is erudite without being turgid, and overall the book touched upon a number of important issues that all managers would do well to consider.

It's worth repeating that this isn't some punchy, hard-hitting recipe book
intended to help bake a better manager. View it as a launching point for your own self-analyses, and it should serve you well enough. It encourages leaders to be realists, pragmatists, and, above all human beings, our inherent foibles notwithstanding. It urges us to take heart:
You don't have to be a clone of Solomon or one of Silicon Valley's crowned princes in order to be an effective leader. Often, just being human is quite enough.

- John Lambert
Vice President and General Manager of Developer Solutions
Rational Software

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