College of Business book review by Dr. Edward Wright

Title: "Strengths Based Leadership"

Authors: Tom Rath and Barry Conchie

Publisher: Gallup Press

Length: 256 pages

Price: $24.95 (Barnes & Noble - hardback)

Reading time: 4 hours

Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Following up on their 2007 best seller, “StrengthsFinder 2.0”, Tom Rath and Barry Conchie of the Gallup Corporation, have a follow-up hit with “Strengths Based Leadership”. Realizing that there is no “best” leadership style, the authors make a strong case for capitalizing on one’s personal strengths in leadership situations and surrounding yourself with a team that compensates for any areas of personal weakness. The book is a continuation on the theme of “positive psychology” and loosely based upon the research of Dr. Elizabeth Hurlock who found that the test scores of students who received praise for good work improved substantially more that those of students who received criticism or no feedback. Similarly, Rath and Conchie propose that utilizing one’s personal strengths will result in more positivity, personal engagement, higher levels of motivation, and overall success.

The “meat” of the book (98 pages) is devoted to three sections: investing in your strengths, maximizing your team, and understanding why people follow. In the first section, the authors contend that one should be aware of personal strengths and how to use them instead of trying to adopt the habits and styles of other successful leaders. They argue that utilizing personal strengths keeps one confident and they refer to research that implies that self-confidence influences long-term career success.

In the second section, Rath and Conchie recommend having diverse, well rounded teams instead of one dominant leader who tries to do everything. These teams should not have similar individual strengths but have adequate talent in four leadership domains: Executing, Influencing, Relationship building, and Strategic thinking. Leaders who have strength in executing know how to make things happen. Those with strength in influencing can be counted on to sell the team’s ideas and mission to others. Relationship building leaders provide the glue that holds an organization together while strategic thinkers keep everyone focused on “what could be”.

In the final section on understanding why people follow, the authors emphasize the importance of communication and staying in touch with the opinions of followers. It is important that leaders provide four basic follower needs: trust, compassion, stability, and hope. Gallop research revealed that the chances of employees being engaged at work were 1 in 12 when they did not trust the company’s leaders. Results were 1 in 2 when trust prevailed. Likewise, employees who felt that the leader cared about them (compassion) are substantially more productive and likely to stay with the organization. Followers also want a leader whose behavior is consistent (stability) and whose outlook is optimistic (hope).

The remainder of the book (pages 99 – 255) consists of instructions for taking the StrengthFinders 2.0 assessment (a code is included for web-site access) along with descriptions of thirty-four leadership “themes”.

Overall, “Strengths Based Leadership” is interesting but a bit lightweight. Rath and Conchie ignore the fact that leadership effectiveness often depends upon the situation and the composition of the followers. For example, in a crisis situation, an authoritative, take-charge leader style will generally be more effective even if that is not the leader’s strength. Likewise, if followers do not have the necessary talent to meet the organization’s goals, it does not matter whether the leader relies upon areas of personal strength or not.

On the positive side, readers may enjoy and benefit from the reference section and self-assessment included with “Strengths Based Leadership”. Discovering one’s own leadership strengths is fun and worthwhile. Just remember that they may not apply to every group or leadership situation.

Dr. Edward Wright is an associate professor of management and strategy in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His research interests include leadership, small business management, and medical technology adoption theory. He is founder and CEO of Keller-Wright, llc. For previously reviewed books, visit our website at www.wcu.edu/cob/.