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Books in Brief

Old stories, new jobs, technological hype, and gay leadership.

by David K. Hurst

Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature

By Joseph L. Badaracco Jr.
Harvard Business School Press,
2006
232 pages, \$26.95

It has long been recognized that good fiction often does a better job of capturing the emotional realities of organizational life than non-fiction. In *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership Through Literature*, Joseph L. Badaracco Jr., the John Shad Professor of Business Ethics at Harvard Business School, draws on his experience teaching MBA students and uses eight selections from serious fiction to encourage executives to explore in depth what it really means to “know thyself.”

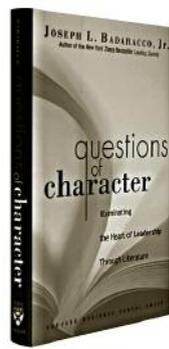
The stories include Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*, and Sophocles’s *Antigone*. Each of the eight discussions is preceded by a key question and then by Professor Badaracco’s thumbnail outline of the story and its protagonist. The eight key questions, such as “Do I have a good

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dream?” and “How flexible is my moral code?” are backed up by subsidiary questions, as the author, in Socratic fashion, rejects easy, superficial responses. He is critical, for example, of the metaphor of the moral compass, arguing that it is useful only for dealing with questions of right and wrong. Many, if not most, leadership challenges demand a choice between two “rights” or, worse still, between two “wrongs.”

Thus the reader is forced by the writer into uncomfortable depths, but is accompanied and supported by the stories, which act as mirrors to his or her own experience. The word *experience*, as the author points out, means literally “from peril,” so in all the stories the actors face dangerous situations in which their characters will be sorely tested. Some leaders, like the captain in Joseph Conrad’s short story “The Secret Sharer,” pass the test as they step up to the responsibility of leadership. Others, such as Louis Auchincloss’s Tony Lowder in *I Come as a Thief*, are destroyed by the experience.

This unusual book will appeal



to reflective managers who may be tired of the formulaic “answers” found in so much management writing. *Questions of Character* shows how it is possible, through the creative use of the Socratic method, to build the feeling of a personal encounter into a management book.

The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan: How to Take Charge, Build Your Team, and Get Immediate Results

By George Bradt, Jayme A. Check, and Jorge Pedraza
Wiley, 2006
240 pages, \$25.95

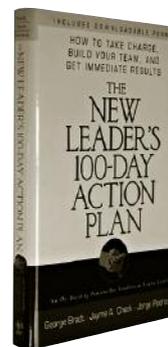
If you are about to take on a new leadership position in an organization, you might want to look at *The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan*, by management consultants George Bradt, Jayme A. Check, and Jorge Pedraza, who specialize in helping managers make a transition from one assignment to another.

The book is divided into three parts — what you should do before accepting a new role, the 100-day action plan itself, and the later, ongoing adjustments to the inevitable surprises, avoiding the most common mistakes, and building loyalty, trust, and commitment. Simple frameworks for applying the ideas in the book are appended to most of the chapters, and forms laying out timetables and other sorts of organization are also available online, where they can be customized.

The concepts themselves are plain vanilla — part and parcel of every Management 101 course — but they fit well with the book’s short-term focus on the individual taking a new position.

The book has three strengths: The first is the emphasis the authors place on being active well before Day One; the second is the anecdotes that accompany the concepts; and the last is the importance placed on the use of symbols and contexts.

The authors contend that, at all costs, you must avoid walking into the new job on Day One and doing



what the incumbent leaders say you must do. By working hard during the “fuzzy front end,” you can ensure that the risks of taking the new position are assessed from three vantage points: those of the organization, your role in it, and you personally. Much of this work is best done even while considering the opportunity, as it’s much easier to walk away before you’ve accepted an offer. Once the job is yours, further work is required to ensure that you “take control of Day One” and make a powerful first impression with actions that support your agenda. This is where the thoughtful choice of locations (e.g., which of your division’s offices you visit), signs (e.g., how you dress), and symbols (e.g., who you talk to) counts; bear in mind that acts of omission may speak louder than actions taken. Of course, if you haven’t done your homework before Day One, you won’t have an agenda and your actions may be only distantly related to what will become the organizational priorities.

The ideas in *The New Leader’s 100-Day Action Plan* will be familiar to most managers, and the book is probably best suited to young managers taking a leadership role for the

first time. More seasoned veterans, however, might find it a helpful *aide-mémoire*.

Future Hype: The Myths of Technology Change

By Bob Seidensticker
Berrett-Koehler, 2006
272 pages, \$15.95

Software expert Bob Seidensticker began his research into technology change during an eight-year stint at Microsoft. In *Future Hype: The Myths of Technology Change*, he offers a balanced, historical perspective that is a useful antidote to the widespread, often uncritical hype about the pace of and prospects for such change.

Of the nine myths he debunks, the first two are the inevitability of exponential change — with change always increasing at progressively greater rates — and the predetermined success of new technologies. He makes it clear that, even for successful innovations, the rate of change usually follows the S-shaped logistics curve, with long lags between invention and takeoff and with extended bursts of growth followed by declines. Markets may become saturated, consumers may be unable to make use of additional features, there may be social resistance to the new technology, or innovations may fail for many other reasons. Although an exponential process — Moore’s Law — governs

the rate at which the power of the microprocessor grows, doubling every 18 months, improvements in the functionality of computers have not advanced correspondingly. Ten years from now, with supercomputer equivalents on our desktops, it’s likely we’ll still be coping with spam in our e-mail inboxes.

Even successful technology is rarely an unalloyed benefit. It usually performs some features of the required job at the expense of others, it may have unintended consequences — think software bugs and viruses — and the technology itself often requires substantial maintenance. The Internet hasn’t “changed everything,” Mr. Seidensticker asserts, pointing out that, for at least the past few centuries, important information has always had an outlet and much of the new information is less valuable than the old. As he puts it, “Some Internet applications are important, such as e-mail, research, company Web sites, and e-commerce. Some are new, such as connecting members of obscure hobbies or finding buyers for used goods. But the important applications aren’t new and the new ones aren’t important.”

The fact is that humankind has long used technology to satisfy its essential physical needs — clothing, shelter, heat, safe food and water, health, and safety — and the latest technologies cater to higher-level but less critical needs. The author illustrates this with a helpful pyram-



Ten years from now, with supercomputers on our desktops, we'll still be coping with spam in our e-mail inboxes.

idal diagram based on Abraham Maslow's well-known hierarchy of human needs. Although many of the individual observations about technological change have been made in the past by others (which simply reinforces the author's point about the value of old information), it is helpful to have all that curmudgeonly skepticism combined here into a coherent single book.

The G Quotient: Why Gay Executives Are Excelling as Leaders...and What Every Manager Needs to Know

By Kirk Snyder
Jossey-Bass, 2006
206 pages, \$24.95

Leadership skills are best developed on the job through particular kinds of experience — tough assignments, significant bosses, and hardships. In *The G Quotient: Why Gay Executives Are Excelling as Leaders...and What Every Manager Needs to Know*, teacher and consultant Kirk Snyder suggests that another kind of experience unexpectedly develops leadership skills: the gay experience. He asks us to look beyond any attitudes we might have about homosexual

orientation to focus on his research, which suggests that gay executives who have publicly acknowledged their sexuality create workplaces where people feel much more engaged in their work activities.

Mr. Snyder identifies seven principles for developing the skills of “G Quotient Leadership,” or leadership with the kind of sensitivity that encourages engagement and participation. These principles are inclusion, creativity, adaptability, connectivity, communication, intuition, and collaboration. He gives us examples of how gay executives use each of these principles in practice and why each is important to engage any employee in his team and his work. Job satisfaction and workplace morale are much higher for gay employees than they are for the average employee nationally, according to his research.

Mr. Snyder's vehicle for presenting his research is a two-part book that outlines the seven principles plus 10 aspects of “G Quotient” leadership that are important to all managers. (The appendix contains instruments for assessing one's own G Quotient

together with averages and ranges of scores for both straight and gay populations of men and women.) In discussing the 10 key takeaways for managers, the author suggests that G Quotient leadership shares a systems-oriented view of the workplace that resonates on a larger scale with philosophies like Taoism. This type of leadership is both objective and subjective, and emphasizes experiential learning over planning.

Thus, G Quotient leaders are often found in the trenches, leading through inspiration and focusing on the positive characteristics of employees. In this essentially entrepreneurial process, G Quotient leaders understand and value themselves, for they have had to come to terms with themselves in often painful ways. Trusting and knowing themselves helps them trust others. Mr. Snyder contends that this leadership style constitutes a competitive advantage for those, whether gay or straight, who will be leading Generation Y in the 21st century. +



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