

# Leadersmithing: Revealing the Trade Secrets of Leadership

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By Eve Poole

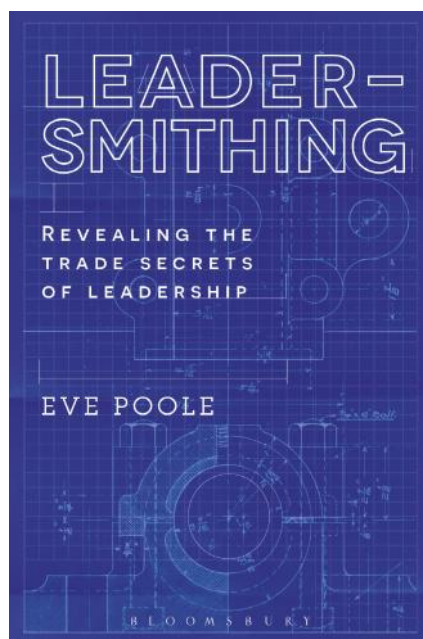
This is a wonderful book. I enjoyed every line of it from the first to the last. But I have always devoured books on management and leadership, from Herzberg and Maslow to Handy and Covey. A fraction of each of them has served to inform a career spent selecting and encouraging leaders in business, as well as in the charitable and public sectors.

So is this just another tome to add to the groaning management shelf, or does it bring something new and distinctive? And, as it is written by a professional theologian, are there some themes which are specially relevant to Christians in the church today?

Let me start by describing what *Leadersmithing* sets out to do. It provides a vast and varied buffet of learning treats for the life-time task of becoming a leader. It is anchored in research carried out at Ashridge Business School and elsewhere over many years. It cleverly defines leadership by reference to what leaders do when faced with a series of well-defined ‘critical incidents’ and it then sets out four clusters of skills, qualities, behaviours and tools – referred to as Foundation Practices – that leaders may deploy in addressing them.

It is based on a very robust view of how learning takes place: muscle memory, self-regulation, reflective judgement and learning to learn. Hence a focus on “apprenticeship”, “smithing” and 10,000 hours of practice.

But if this sounds a little arid, that would be wholly wrong. Seldom, if ever, can there have been a management book which contains so many stories, so many pictures of real life, so many analogies with everyday examples. References reach for the horizons of history



and culture – Caesar, Genghis Khan and Elizabeth 1, as well as Goya, Holbein and Sassetta all get a mention. And that is just in the first chapter.

The structure of the book is unusual. The first third, the theory, is a conventional read. It is thoughtful, fresh, wide-ranging. The final two thirds is more of a work-book. The theory sets out the seventeen critical incidents in some detail. Each is patiently and clearly described,

together with a definition and description of character and why it is so important. This is followed by a detailed explanation of how learning occurs.

Eve loves playing cards. Diamonds represent “sharpness” (what you are good at); clubs, your physical impact; spades, a set of tools to practice; hearts, dealing with others. The significance of the cards? Little in a card-playing sense though the cards have two clear assets. First, there are 52 of them, one for every week of the year. Leadership needs practice; you might as well get used to it. So practise one element every week. Secondly, the cards can be shuffled. Different critical incidents require different combinations of these qualities to be exercised in different sequences and with different weighting. Obvious really, but neat, nonetheless.

A terrific read. Practical, actionable, good sense. It underlines the reality that learning never stops and it is going to take a lifetime. And there are multiple opportunities to laugh out loud. I specially liked the tale of the distinguished Chief Executive who when asked what was the first thing that he did when he was alone in his grand new office, replied: I called my Mum.

But has this book any Christian significance? Is it relevant that it is written by a theologian-author, indeed that rarest of beings, a woman-theologian-business-author? My answer would be yes in



Credit: Lovelace

If your boss makes your life a misery, leave.

two quite different senses, one clear and obvious, the other less so. The first is the relevance of leadership in the church. As church attendance numbers decline, as the church is marginalised in public life, as church buildings creak and as the wider, secular community seems both ill at ease with itself as well as sceptical of the church’s potential contribution, so it feels as though leadership in the church has never been more important. Not merely leadership in the conventional sense of the church hierarchy, Bishops, Deans, upwardly mobile clergy, but plain, simple lay leadership too. This is overwhelmingly a book for ordinary people to exercise their extraordinary skills, to grasp the leadership challenges of society and bring the lessons of faith to bear on them.

The less glaring response is that this is a book suffused with Christian awareness and values. Just a few examples will make the case. In the chapter on character, there is a fascinating analysis of why in some circumstances, the holocaust being a key example, human beings have a propensity to practise obedience to authority rather than compassion, a deeply Christ-like quality. *Leadersmithing* gives an intriguing explanation for this. In the section on good and bad bosses, Eve is unambiguous: if your boss makes your life a misery, leave. No job is worth it. You are too precious and life is too short. In the section on sleep (a vital ingredient for effectiveness), Eve quotes a sleep expert as advocating: ‘bed-time meditation, breathing exercises and

counting your blessings.....which is known to help you sleep better”. Sounds very like prayer to me. Finally, under the heading of “fuel”, there is a delightful list of suggestions for increasing effectiveness. These include: rest, water, bananas, flattery, laughter, singing, music, dancing, beauty, altruism, exercise, outdoors, mindfulness, meditation, prayer etc.

I love the way, in this entirely secular book, Eve unselfconsciously and unapologetically introduces a smattering of basic Christian beliefs: so compassion over obedience, the precious nature of each individual, and prayer all play a part in this important book. And this is all the more powerful as every theme in the book is supported by secular research and robust evidence. **IBO**



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