
BOOK REVIEW

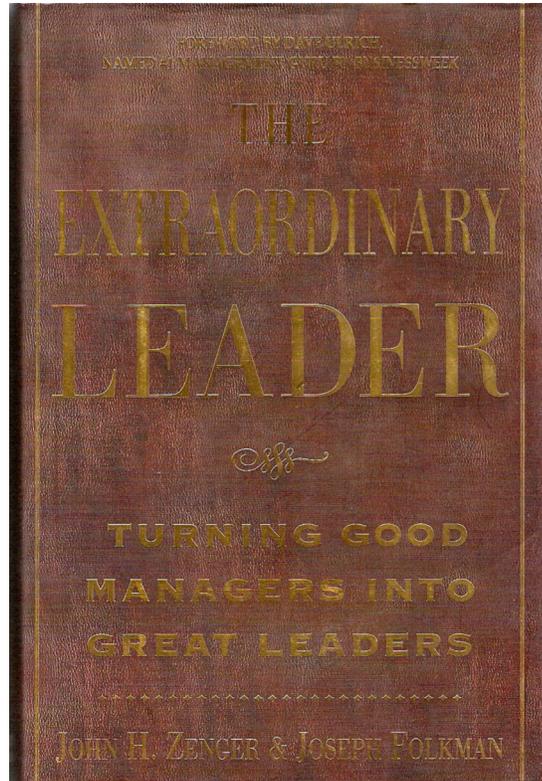
" The Extraordinary Leader: Turning Good Managers into Great Leaders " by John H. Zenger and Joseph R. Folkman

McGraw-Hill: 2002
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The Extraordinary Leader is a book that tells us that anyone can learn how to lead. The authors, John H. Zenger and Joseph R. Folkman, encourage leadership among their readers through presenting hard data and scientifically-based studies in a realistic manner that aspiring leaders from a wide range of backgrounds and applications can relate to. Since it was written in 2002 it has evoked interest among many people who want to become leaders or improve their leadership skills effectively, and is considered a classic reference on the topic.

Zenger and Folkman expand on ideas in *Results-Based Leadership* written in 1999 by Zenger and two other authors. That book focused on the results that good leaders get, while the newer book focuses on attributes of good leaders and how to apply the authors' "leadership science" for a consistent, long-term leadership team.

Zenger is CEO of Zenger Folkman, and Folkman is its president – a firm that helps organizations and individuals improve leadership effectiveness to drive business results. Both have written several other books and numerous scholarly articles. Folkman is an expert on using employee surveys to effect organizational change, and Zenger's expertise is in productivity and team dynamics.

The Extraordinary Leader offers insights supported by research-based evidence. The authors skillfully analyzed over 200,000 assessments of 25,000 managers, which is so far the most extensive research of any book about leadership. The research particularly emphasized the importance of good leadership in improving work performance. It links this data to business results such as unit profitability, employee retention and commitment, and customer satisfaction.

The authors present a new model of leadership, challenging readers to test their old leadership strategies against the new insights from their expansive case studies. They identified sixteen strengths, or *competencies*, that separate great leaders from average ones. Among their breakthroughs is the importance of maximizing strengths rather than correcting weaknesses in both yourself and those you lead.

They also establish the importance of balancing strengths, scattering them across different areas of expertise and across the organization. Average leaders tend to be satisfied with their status quo and current level of effectiveness in an organisation and do not seek to improve their leadership style. They show that no one pattern or configuration of competencies exists that works for all leaders or in all organizations.

Following are steps organisations can take to bring out leadership qualities in their people:

- Adopt one model of leadership and stick with it.
- Set very high expectations for leaders.
- Involve executives and senior leaders in leadership development.
- Focus on enhancing competencies that are already substantial.
- Employ multiple learning vehicles such as 360° feedback, coaches and mentors, and "action learning" projects.

And these are steps you can personally take to improve your own leadership style:

- Display excellence in your personal character (integrity, ethics, humility) and interpersonal skills.
- Start small on the authors' "S" curve of leadership development and build on these small steps.
- Focus on one of your strengths, excel at it, and use it to boost areas in which you have weaknesses.

- Connect strengths in two or more diverse areas of aptitude.
- Work on the “Five Fatal Flaws.”

They use an interesting metaphor of a tent supported by poles consisting of their sixteen competencies to demonstrate that raising any one pole increases the volume of the tent – your overall effectiveness as a leader. Many will find this analogy very helpful.

In spite of their strategy of focusing on competencies rather than deficiencies, they identify five weaknesses that leaders must not overlook. They call them the “Five Fatal Flaws,” and they are often more obvious to others than to the individual who has them:

1. An inability to learn from one’s mistakes
2. A lack of core interpersonal skills
3. A lack of openness to new or different ideas
4. A lack of accountability for one’s own actions
5. A lack of initiative to make improvements

The book stresses that being in the top tenth percentile of leaders is a concrete and learnable skill. For the vast majority of organizations, improving leadership and management is essential for success and growth. It’s not enough to be content with the status quo. Leadership affects every measurable dimension of performance in an organisation. It clearly has a huge impact on every aspect of success, and that is why it is important to prioritize leadership development.

I highly recommend *The Extraordinary Leader* to anyone who wants gain insights about leadership from these informative experts and the solid evidence of their research.

[Dr Darryl Cross is a clinical and organisational psychologist as well as a credentialed executive and personal coach. He is also an author, international speaker and university lecturer. Dr Darryl assists people to find their strengths and reach their goals. Further information on Dr Darryl can be seen at www.DrDarryl.com]