

Anders Örtenblad (ed.) *Debating Bad Leadership: Reasons and Remedies*
Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 406pp

The thing about bad leadership, the heartbreaker, really, is that it is not always obvious. Anybody reading this review will nod, remembering the laughably ignorant, woefully incompetent leaders they were exposed to – individuals who were just as oblivious to the fact that they commanded no respect. In his chapter to this book, Jo Whitehead reports that just under 30%, i.e. almost a third of “leaders”, are actually so bad at their job that they will be dismissed. It is an enormous and costly problem, in other words, and one that is not sufficiently explored, according to Anders Örtenblad, Professor of Working Life Science at the School of Business and Law at the University of Agder in Grimstad, Norway. This book is his answer to the problem. He brings together 20 chapters written by scholars and leadership consultants from around the world, from Sweden to Tasmania, from parts of the USA to parts of Europe as well as Asians and Africans. The malady of bad leadership is clearly universal and perhaps the best remedies can also be found in all the reaches of the globe.

Barbara Kellerman, the author of the indispensable *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters* (2004), sets the tone in her preface by asking why the “leadership industry remains largely divorced from the real world” with its persistent focus on “excellent” leadership. Örtenblad follows suit with an admirably comprehensive guide to the issues and the book, including an excellent set of definitions of “bad leadership,” which can include everything between being ineffective, incompetent, abusive, dishonest, uncommunicative, lazy, impolitic and even treasonous. The volume itself is divided into seven parts. After the necessary and useful introductory chapter, sections are devoted to the themes of how bad leaders are formed, how to define bad leadership, who supports bad leaders, how roles (or positions) force individuals into mediocrity in leadership, how organizational “supports” fail and the final one on how ethical lapses of judgement and human prejudices define bad leadership. Included at the end are two chapters that question the obsession for leadership, including one that introduces critical theory to the field of leader studies.

The book is overwhelmingly concerned with the private sector, though a few chapters refer to poor political leadership, but this should not discourage readers who want to pursue the subject of bad leadership in the public sector, which I consider endemic. Many of the same factors, of course, are encountered in both spheres, and each and every one of the chapters in this volume is well worth study. Collectively, they shed light on the conditions that lead organizations to recruit, nurture and then elevate incompetents to positions of leadership. Naturally, bad leaders reveal an assortment of personal and professional flaws. Inevitably, they are corrupt at some level in that they have placed their personal interest above that of the good of the company or organization they lead.

A number of chapters examine the “followership” as critical to sustaining bad leaders. Either because of apathy or out of intimidation, organizations are remarkably quite adept at tolerating abuse and incompetence. Unmotivated employees and middle managers, either tenured or so secured in their positions that they do nothing to resist bad leadership, in fact legitimize it. One could argue that contesting the leaders’ decisions and priorities is simply not worth a career or a salary, particularly as employees age, but it does point to the need for organizations to create spaces where grievances against inadequate leadership can be addressed, and the threat of bad leadership can be eliminated. Many chapters cover this sort of structural response. If there is one lacuna in this collection, I think, it is that boards of



directors do not sufficiently receive enough blame for their acceptance of sub-par leadership. They inevitably turn a blind eye either because they were co-opted or because the bottom line simply does not betray the poor behaviour of the leadership.

Örtenblad's collection examines the various manifestations of bad leadership. The inability to rise above "the bias for action," for instance, is seen as a source of tolerance. This brings to mind the CEO who is so concerned with meeting short-term objectives that he or she becomes oblivious to the realities that his or her industry has been transformed by a challenging technology. The boor is tolerated because his or her coterie of carefully assembled and highly rewarded "yes" people protect him or her. They have in fact become the enablers of bad leadership, which means that the corrective to the presence of a corrupt CEO should normally entail a cleaning up of the entire C-suite and, depending on the circumstances, a serious evaluation of mid-level leadership as well.

It becomes clear through the various chapters that bad leaders can carry on their malpractice because they were able to convince people they reported to, or accounted to, that they were more than competent. Until the day when the bridge collapsed, the patient in a hospital was mistreated, a child failed school or when faced with a new challenge, they simply crumbled like a deck of cards. What mystifies anyone who is curious about public leadership is this question: why is the system so tolerant of bad leadership?

This volume will serve readers who clearly seek a more theoretical perspective on bad leadership, and I will not hide the fact that very few concrete examples of bad leadership are actually raised and discussed. Is it because of the embarrassment of choices? It is a pity because real-life case studies could illustrate the various stages of bad leadership that are theorized and help the task of diagnosis. That task, one assumes, is left to us, the readers and beneficiaries of this excellent book.

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