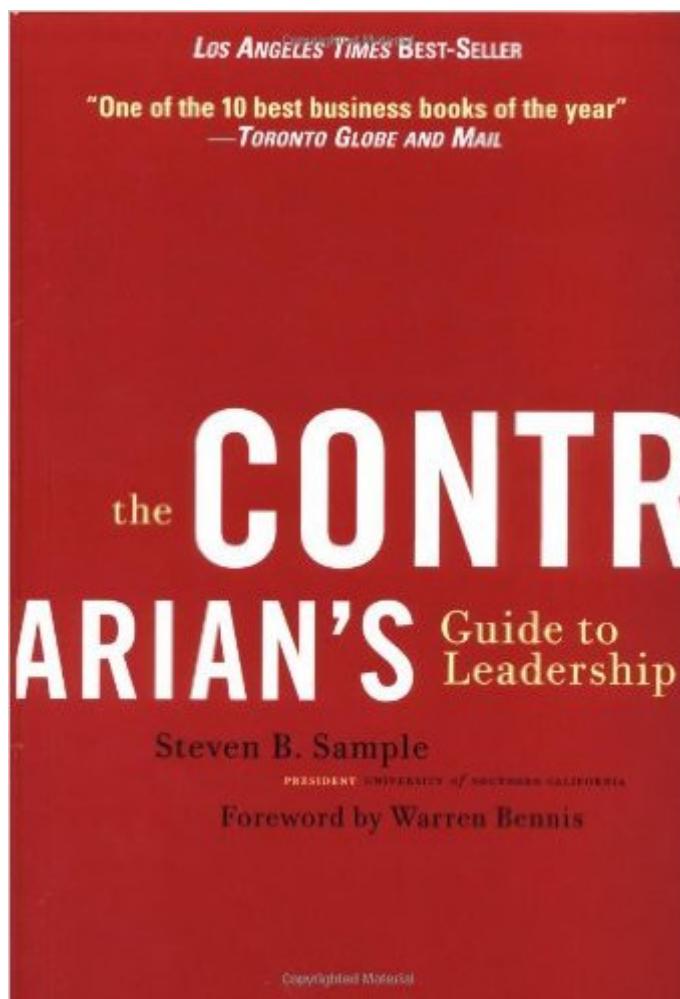


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The Contrarian's Guide To Leadership



Synopsis

In this offbeat approach to leadership, college president Steven B. Sample-the man who turned the University of Southern California into one of the most respected and highly rated universities in the country-challenges many conventional teachings on the subject. Here, Sample outlines an iconoclastic style of leadership that flies in the face of current leadership thought, but a style that unquestionably works, nevertheless. Sample urges leaders and aspiring leaders to focus on some key counterintuitive truths. He offers his own down-to-earth, homespun, and often provocative advice on some complex and thoughtful issues. And he provides many practical, if controversial, tactics for successful leadership, suggesting, among other things, that leaders should sometimes compromise their principles, not read everything that comes across their desks, and always put off decisions.

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Customer Reviews

This book intrigued me for a couple of reasons. First, here was a book written by a university president - and an extraordinary one at that - on a subject traditionally dominated by corporate executives, professors of business, and, no kidding, professional basketball coaches. And second, ever since my graduate school days I've been especially absorbed by unconventional strains of thought, and here's a book that drives a wedge into the most predictable of genres. Steven Sample, who assumed the presidency of an already upwardly mobile university and made it that much better, does not disappoint. His chapter entitled "Work for Those Who Work for You" really hit home. I've

always believed that managers and leaders should empower their people and set them up for success. This approach frequently requires that I perform some rather mundane tasks like making phone calls and sending out meeting requests. But according to Sample, that's what real leaders should be doing. "Virtually all leadership experts, whether they subscribe to traditional or au courant theories, depict leadership as a glamorous and majestic calling. But the contrarian isn't fooled. He knows that effective day-to-day leadership isn't so much about himself, as it is about the men and women he chooses to be his chief lieutenants. He knows that a lot of the things on his own plate will be minutiae and silliness, while his lieutenants will get to do the fun and important things." This book is exceptionally Western; that is, there are numerous references to Machiavelli (including an entire chapter), Clausewitz, and Plato, for instance, but none to Confucius, Lao Tzu, or Sun Tzu. I was somewhat surprised by this if only because Sample, throughout his tenure as president of USC, has consistently reached out to the Pacific Rim.

As the foreword to the book makes clear, Steven Sample has been immensely successful as a university president with a leadership style based on common sense, optimism and a personal philosophy of leadership. Readers looking for a dramatic, non-traditional idea of leadership will not find it here, despite the title promising a "contrarian" idea of leadership. The first few chapters of Sample's book make clear that leadership comes from common-sensical values such as nurturing the growth of lieutenants and maintaining open communication lines with those lieutenants. For instance, Sample makes clear that undermining lieutenants' authority or cutting off their communication to the leader spells sure death to the leader. This seems commensensical enough, and I doubt Sample is the first one to make this point. What is "contrarian" is Sample's choice of inspiration: Machiavelli. Instead of responding to other "leadership" materials, Sample spins out a personal philosophy of leadership based on a selective reading of Machiavelli. Sample would like his readers to prioritize Machiavelli and other "supertexts" to the exclusion of pat, journalistic answers to leadership and management style. Fair enough. The exiled Florentine, Shakespeare and Plato make great teachers, and it's probably time that managers revisit them after being 20 years in the work force. These (Western) supertexts provide timeless lessons that are more digestible and practical than Sun Tzu et al. While Sample's reading of Machiavelli puts a good spin on an unpalatable text, Sample makes the point that leadership is not for idealists. You've got to get your hands dirty, make unpopular decisions, and "give the devil his due."

First, let me say this book captures some wonderful aspects of leadership. The book is written well

and captures the authors thoughts and ideas succinctly. Ultimately though the content goes in circles and he ends up presenting something not that different from any of the other books on leadership. If one steps back and looks at the forest presented here, it is that in order to be an effective leader one needs to make good decisions, evaluate data carefully, think freely, possess both Machiavellian tendencies and play the role of servant leadership to one's followers, and one needs to communicate and listen well. OK, so we have heard all of that before, so what is different? Well, one of the highlights is a section on what the author calls "supertexts". Great leaders ought to read the classics. Really. Forget newspapers and especially trade publications and read the story of Jesus in Matthew, the story of Paul in Acts, the story of Moses in Exodus, read Plato, Hamlet, Dante's Divine Comedy, etc., as understanding the human condition is far more valuable than the latest news articles or trade flash. This is a radical concept and a rare one coming from a leadership and business approach. It is summarized as "you are what you read". A novel and unique approach on what enables good leadership. I also loved the sections on "knowing which hill you are willing to die on" and the "art of listening". Both provide an enlightened view of well-covered topics. Overall, the book presents some great points but ultimately ends in the leadership paradox. Few can really articulate this well and fewer still can solve this paradox in practice.

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