

LEADING FROM THE LIONS' DEN

By Tom R. Harper

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Consisting of 66 chapters, this book references each book of the Bible, often drawing remote and inconsistent leadership lessons from the sources.

Mr. Harper spends two or three pages on each book of the Bible, and quotes sports figures (Pat Riley) historical figures (Churchill), authors (Millay) and pundit professors (Sowell) among others as well as Biblical references.

Judging from the cover reviews, pastors and professors enjoyed Mr. Harper's research. As an entrepreneur I found his advice too shallow and suggestions too numerous, reminding me of devouring a big bag of potato chips to satisfy my hunger: when finished I was still hungry, wishing I had had a juicy steak instead of empty calories.

In fairness, Mr Harper is on to something few Christians doubt: the Bible is the roadmap to leading a successful life here on earth, never mind the hereafter. From a purely pragmatic perspective, every world religion has a version of the

Golden Rule, so there must be something to it. Mr. Harper's book has so many rules, so much contradiction, it is a pharisaical holiday. There is a rule for everyone.

Let me cite a few examples. Chapter 6, "Exit with a Slow Fizzle", on Joshua, discusses the necessity for every executive to have an exit strategy. We will all move on, whether to greener pastures or pushing up daisies. Entrepreneurs are renowned for holding on to control long after it makes sense, or trying to pass on the business to disinterested and unprepared progeny. Moses was anxious enough to move on that he prepared his successor. Most of us are not so gracious, and business history is littered with companies that fail in the second generation because of inadequate or non-existent exit planning. Here Mr. Harper has a gorgeous opportunity to discuss nobility, grace and modesty, those traits so becoming to leaders, so like Christ. Instead, he goes all shallow, reminding us, "It's been about you long

enough”. Hardly words to resonate with someone who has started, nurtured and built a business over a lifetime. Why not move in the direction of reminding us why we start businesses in the first place? The entrepreneurial spirit first moves us to start something because we must, we can, we dream. For many of us after a few years the focus shifts to leaving a legacy. Mr. Harper retires to the mundane instead of encouraging businessmen to put together an exit strategy because it is the right thing to do, the graceful way to depart, and the Christ-like way to close out a life. This is a fine chapter with a great nugget. Its two pages left me hungry and annoyed that there was not deeper development.

With so many suggestions, inconsistencies are unavoidable. For example, in the first chapter on Genesis, Mr. Harper states, wisely, I think, “The original act of divine creativity in Genesis was executed by one mind (notwithstanding the Trinity). God didn’t wait to ask us what we wanted. His vision was clear. Later, humans had their chance to invent and originate, but not until the Lord had completed His foundational work”.

Later in Chapter 30, “Lead like an Impartial Sleeper” references the book of Amos. First, am I missing something here? What exactly is an impartial sleeper? Is this a term unknown to me but part of the lexicon for business professors or pastors?

This chapter on Amos references Nelson Mandela, quoting his herd-driving experience, “Lead from the back—and let others believe they are in front”. This is completely contrary to Chapter One. I know how to lead from the rear: hang back, let others figure it out and then take credit.

Mr. Harper states, “Mandela’s style annoyed some of his more action-oriented henchmen”. I am confident it did. Leaders lead. They do not hang back and let others believe they are in front.

Mandela apparently gathered information from his underlings before he came to an in-

formed decision, which is fine, but it is not the same as letting others believe they are actually leading. This is a trait we see in American politics today, and it is not called leadership. It is called cowardice and comes from the fear of making a wrong decision. How is this connected to the behavior of the steady, pedestrian farmer-author Amos?

If Mr. Harper’s audience consists of patient and holy men who lead churches, perhaps they can absorb and internalize 66 brief chapters. My favorite Christian business leadership books are texts that work for everyday decision-making, but also provide the groundwork for leaders who meet over coffee on Wednesday mornings to provide support and prayer for each other. These chapters are too shallow and contradictory, mixing sports examples, TV shows and business vignettes. I cannot imagine the book’s use as a centering text for groups of Christian business men and women. It left me longing for what I believe Mr. Harper really wanted to do, which is to provide rich and powerful lessons for us to use to enhance day to day business, provide help for knotty problems, ensure long-term thinking and assure continuity. I wish he had taken four or five or seven books of the Bible and explored them more deeply.

Besides the leadership principles there are at least 62 suggestions embedded in the text including “Tell a story...” (Ch. 5), “Do not ride unaccompanied in a car...” (Ch. 10), and “Be quiet to appear wise” (Ch. 20). With so many admonitions it is impossible to remember them all. Many books of the Bible simply do not lend themselves to management techniques. Others do and deserve a richer, deeper investigation. Mr. Harper clearly has the capability to run deeper. I wish he had focused more on those parts of Scripture laden with material (the Sermon on the Mount alone could yield 200 pages) and ignored those with only the most tenuous link to management.