

Sharpen: A Guidebook for Business Ownership and Adventures in Leadership

By D. Cooper and D. Hiss
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REVIEWED BY KARL J. BAKER

Being in a position of leadership requires individuals to ask challenging questions of themselves and their organizations. Leaders have unique pressures, opportunities, and responsibilities. In *Sharpen*, Dan Cooper and Drew Hiss (2019) attempt to provide a framework for business leaders—one rooted in wisdom, excellence, and timeless truths. The book of Proverbs, attributed to King Solomon, serves as their source of inspiration. “Our aspiration for this book is to bring to life leadership principles written by history’s most successful leader, and help you amp your leadership effectiveness by making those ideas and principles simple to access and easier to apply” (p. 7).

Cooper and Hiss claim the principles and ideas of Solomon, whom they consider to be the wealthiest and most successful leader in history, will make choices and decisions easier for the modern business leader. Both Cooper and Hiss have founded and sold companies, have extensive business expertise, and display a clear passion for helping businesses and leaders thrive. Both identify as Christians and see this work as an integration of their Christian faith with business success. They are unapologetic in their passion for business and its vital role in society, promoting the “virtues of business as a commerce engine, a means to create wealth, and a way to serve others for the common good” (p. 5).

The book is focused on best practices for the business leader. Beyond using Proverbs as a foundation, the book is limited in its biblical integration. The majority of the work is spent on practical application and individual reflection. The writing could be described as more Christian guidance to aspiring leaders than deep integration of biblical theology. The marketplace can be cut-throat and lacking grace, so the authors seek to encourage the readers to maintain a high standard of excellence and integrity, despite the challenging environments.

The book is designed around nine large sections or parts, each containing a number of chapters to expand upon the theme of the part. Here is a brief overview of each part and the advice of the authors therein:

1. **Wisdom.** God’s foundation is wisdom. We lack wisdom and must be curious. Ask God for assistance and guidance. This process will take time and consistency.
2. **Leadership.** Leadership is an opportunity and responsibility. Include prophetic voices that will speak truth. Make plans, but be open to divine intervention. Be prudent and aware of your leadership situations. Express gratitude.
3. **Relationships.** Communicate clearly and directly. Maintain fidelity in commitments, particularly to family. Understand that leaders set culture, for good and for bad. Maintain strong friendships.
4. **Financials.** Be aware of spending habits and tendencies. Wealth is not bad but can be destructive. Debt can be a tool, when used correctly. When properly leveraged, businesses and leaders can impact the lives of many through generosity.
5. **Challenges.** Don’t make foolish mistakes. No matter how successful one becomes, God is bigger and more important. Embrace humility and be diligent.
6. **Speech.** Words carry weight and create culture. Listen first and ask good questions. Be willing to learn and try new things. Address issues with people clearly and graciously.
7. **Reputation.** Ethical living and integrity are always the right decision. Make things right when things have gone wrong. We have a responsibility to care for the poor and oppressed.

8. Pitfalls. Be aware of what stirs up anger. Revenge is unhealthy. Comparison and envy will limit a company and a person's self-esteem. Rest and time-off combats workaholic tendencies. Know your weaknesses and temptation patterns.
9. Self-Awareness. While America may have an abundance of things and wealth, we can lack joy, patience, hope, and contentment. These virtues are possible for the leader but will take work and commitment.

Each part and chapter opens with a quote. These are mainly from scholars, writers, and experts in fields other than theology or business. The text does use citations and additional sources, but the sources are mostly broadly accessible trade books, quotes from movies or videos, or non-academic essays. Additional resources are available from the company website at acumenimpact.com

The authors acknowledge their own cultural and political bias. They admit to being “conservative by nature. I’m a believer in capitalism, profit, and small government” (p. 209). That being said, this quote is taken from the section on injustice, where the authors go on to claim that social justice is not a dirty word and leaders have an opportunity to confront injustices. The conservative bias is a strong bass note to the book, establishing many of their viewpoints of business. However, the authors are also flexible and able to acknowledge the world is full of nuance.

One of the key features of the book is the push toward application. At the core, Cooper and Hiss are practitioners and desire for the reader to be able to take the wisdom of Proverbs into a tangible business setting. Each chapter is concluded with an application section, providing pointed questions, examples, and reflections for the reader. This feature creates an ease of accessibility for the reader to engage the principles. This book would work well as a resource to be paired alongside hands-on training for those currently in business leadership.

One of the central claims of the authors is that leadership is the most central and important part of everything, especially in business. While leadership is important, the claim of it being foundational and central may reveal limitations of the text. Biblical values such as love, grace, sacrifice, or redemption might be considered more foundational and central themes for the Christian businessperson. Jesus was more than a leader. He was a revolutionary who embodied love through downward descent (Philippians 2:5-11). One of the limitations of the book is the lack of any conversation with the person,

words, or life of Jesus. Cooper and Hiss do not claim any theological expertise and they do not utilize theological sources outside of some of the quotes to open chapters and the quoting of scripture.

The lack of theological sources may be the reason for the limited depth with which the authors engage the book of Proverbs. The book lacks an acknowledgement of the Jewish nature of Proverbs, the role of Proverbs within the arc of Jewish wisdom literature, or the book's place within the larger narrative of Scripture. Solomon, the centerpiece of their leadership example, is rarely mentioned in the book, and when mentioned, there seems to be a lack of contextualization of his story, role within history, or various missteps. The authors may be reading Proverbs through a top-down, hierarchical, power-centric lens, missing the bottom-up reading that would include vulnerable or marginalized voices. Solomon was a giant in Jewish history, but Israel was a fragile and largely unprotected nation. The book is written from the perspective of a top executive, looking down toward the employee level. It does not supply a framework for employees or those who might be getting opportunities to move up in a corporate structure.

On the whole, while the book has potential applications for those in business leadership, it has limitations for application in the academic setting. The themes and applications are general in nature and not particularly unique. The integration of biblical and theological reflections serves to confirm an idea or concept rather than offer deeper inquiry and application of biblical principles. The work is not academic in nature and does not consult academic sources. For those conducting academic research in business leadership, there may be more academically and theologically robust reflections on leadership, wisdom, and the Proverbs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karl Baker is currently the college pastor at Vista Community Church in Temple, Texas, where he lives with his wife and two boys. He holds degrees from Baylor's Truett Seminary, Moody Theological Seminary, and the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. Karl also blogs at karljbaker.com.