

Book Review:

Maximum Performance: A Practical Guide to Leading
and Managing People at Work

Author: Forster, N.

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Issue 1
Foreword
Guest
Editorial
Regular
Papers
Reviews

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This is a refreshing and stimulating book and it very much deserves a wider audience than I suspect it will get. Although it targets the MBA market and 'those who want to update their management skills', the book is in danger of falling between two stools. Against the promotional power of the big textbook publishers, it could easily be overlooked; all the more so since the title does not fall neatly into a single management field category such as performance management, leadership, human resource management or strategic management.

Maximum Performance comes with its own endorsements. After the title page, there is 'acclaim' from five business leaders and academics, one of whom describes it as 'a valuable source book, packed full of useful ideas for current and aspiring leaders'. That just about sums it up. In just under 600 pages, Forster has produced a veritable Chinese emporium of ideas, theories, 'road tested' exercises and self evaluation exercises, as well as insightful mini cases of past and present leaders. Some of the book's highlights are buried in highly idiosyncratic, but amusing notes at the end of chapters. For example, there is advice about the benefits of remembering and telling jokes, the evils of that 'tragic package' PowerPoint, and a potted history of human evolution in three paragraphs.

It is precisely this engaging and discursive style, which distinguishes Maximum Performance from most textbooks and increases its value as 'a guide to personal lifelong learning and self-development'. The author concedes that not everyone has the natural talent to become a champion sportsperson, such as Tiger Woods or the Williams sisters. Nevertheless, he believes that by working systematically through a manual such as this, it is possible to learn to be a leader, "because almost all leaders throughout history have achieved this through a combination of self belief, will power, grit, determination, hard work and self education" (p. 17). Of course, the process of getting to the top in sport and staying there requires many of these same qualities. However, being a top player and a successful team leader requires an additional set of qualities and competencies.

Steve Waugh, the former Australian cricket captain, is used to illustrate Forster's thesis to great effect. Under the heading 'Captain Marvel', Forster explains that, at the time of his appointment in 1997 there were no doubts about his playing ability, but there were serious concerns about his leadership potential. Some described him as 'surlly' and 'self-absorbed'. However, as Forster demonstrates, Waugh made a conscious decision to develop his team leadership skills after he was appointed captain. Looking back, it becomes clear that Waugh was responsible for directing, motivating and empowering one of the greatest cricket teams in the history of the sport. He made skilful use of emotional symbols, he became a very effective public and dyadic communicator, he was committed to nurturing and encouraging his players, and he ensured that loyalty, trust and mateship were always core values in team culture.

The first five chapters are the core of the book. They define and discuss the basic leadership roles, skills and competencies. The opening chapter is wide ranging, and establishes the author's point

of view on key issues, especially with respect to the significance of charisma, which he dismisses as 'probably the most misunderstood and overrated capability that leaders are supposed to possess'. An omission in this chapter is the absence of a coherent rationale for the content and sequence of the chapters that follow. It would also have been useful to include examples of particular leaders who have matched (or failed to match) their leadership style to changing organisational contexts and life cycles.

Chapter 2 deals with personal performance topics and contains an extremely insightful treatment of stress and the damaging impact of 'toxic personalities'. Despite the current trend to play down the importance of personality in the leadership literature, my research suggests that a great deal of collateral damage is done to organisations by so called leaders nursing 'a chip on the shoulder', or whose ambition far exceeds their ability.

Readers will get a great deal of practical benefit from Chapters 3 and 4. The former contains some wise tips on both one on one and formal communications, whereas the latter stresses the importance of employee motivation and empowerment, the main elements of which are neatly summarised in 'ten interlinked principles'. The often untapped advantages of diversity in team effectiveness are highlighted in Chapter 5 and, as a step towards realising their benefits; Forster advocates the creation of a 'Team Charter'. Following on from this discussion, Forster then explores one of the most urgent and persistent challenges of diversity management: the need to appoint more women leaders and to acknowledge the 'male and female dimensions of successful leaders and managers'.

Chapters 7 to 12 provide a lively and realistic insight into organisational dynamics. Chapter 7 deals perceptively with issues of power and politics and Chapter 8 confronts the challenges of corporate cultural change with an inspiring analysis of the Continental Airlines change programme. Two of the most incisive chapters are 9 and 10, precisely because of the compelling way in which they present the case for an integrated approach to innovation, cultural learning and knowledge management systems. Such an approach is pressing because "we no longer have the luxury or the time to learn by doing or to rely on experience and common sense accumulated over many years" (p. 426).

Forster begins to draw the threads together by focusing on two of the great, unresolved leadership challenges of our time. In Chapter 11, he deals with the emerging people management issues arising from new technology and the networked society. He points out that, despite increases in productivity, working hours 'never decrease' and 'we all suffer from increasing levels of information overload and technostress'. A more extensive exploration of the possible social and industrial implications of these trends could be a topic for the next edition.

In some ways the challenge outlined in the penultimate chapter is even more daunting. Forster recites an all too familiar, but still depressing, catalogue of unethical and often criminal behaviour in leading public and private sector organisations, spanning a wide spectrum of industries and countries. However, he does manage to sound a positive and even optimistic note in presenting a 'business case for ethical leadership and management', based upon the growing recognition that, for sustained maximum performance, trust and reputation are the critical success factors.

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