

Book Review

The Mind of the Leader

Hougaard, R. & Carter, J. (2018). *The Mind of the Leader: How to Lead Yourself, Your People, And Your Organization for Extraordinary Results*. Harvard Business Review Press. 224 pp. ISBN 9781633693425.

Rebecca Daly Cofer (Georgia Southern University)

There is an abundance of books touting the secret to effective leadership, whether through specific trainings, online tools, or techniques guaranteed to produce a more aware and involved leader. Whether searching on Amazon, at the local community library, or corporate bookstore, leadership texts are present in spades, as society strives to become better leaders, and thus improve their organizations. Hougaard and Carter (2018) are included in this plethora of leadership books, but what sets their book apart from the many others is the human element that remains the focus of their text. Broken in to the three parts described in its expanded title, *The Mind of the Leader* discusses the human foundations to the leadership equation as it relates to the leader, their team, and the organization. Within the three parts are repeated sections about understanding the audience, mindfully leading that group and incorporating compassion and selflessness into the work of the leader. Hougaard and Carter (2018) come from the corporate world, but their experience working with companies across the globe proves valuable in the insights offered, although these insights tend to be business-centric.

After conducting research on over 30,000 leaders across companies, Hougaard and Carter (2018) found three mental qualities that are critical to successful leadership- mindfulness (M), selflessness (S), and compassion (C). The authors frame their entire text around the MSC leadership approach, insisting that “only internal drivers ... can engage employees on the deeper level needed for long-term commitment and productivity” (p. 7). *The Mind of the Leader* puts the human back in to the equation of leadership and provides interesting real-life examples along with strategies for applying the elements of MSC leadership. Hougaard and Carter do not agree with the Great Man Theory of leadership, which asserts that leaders are born, not made. Instead, their text encourages the reader that the characteristics that make up a successful leader are traits which can be learned through awareness and practice with the technique they provide throughout the book.

Perhaps the most important part of the text is one of the early sections titled “The Anatomy of Mindfulness”, which gives the reader the biological details behind neuroplasticity and the brain’s ability to learn new things. For the novice science reader, this section is simple, yet descriptive in its review of basic cognitive functions. Explanations about the functioning of

the brain are brief, but critical in framing the flexibility of the brain and how it relates to developing leadership qualities. Referencing a novice-friendly figure about prefrontal lobe takeover, this section succinctly explains how trainings like the ones sprinkled through each chapter “increases the density of grey cells in our cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that thinks rationally and solves problems” (p. 9). *The Mind of the Leader* centers around the idea that mindfulness is both a practice and a state of mind; this reframing of mindfulness allows the leader to understand it as a trait that can be learned. Hougaard and Carter (2018) not only reframe this idea but also provide the anatomical reasons behind why mindfulness is possible.

Although at times the text seems to repeat itself, the real value in the sections is the Quick Tips and Reflections that concludes each chapter. Leadership books can sometimes lean toward the authorial, often offering abstract ideas of how to excel as a leader without providing real-life applications of these ideas. Hougaard and Carter (2018) do exactly the opposite, as each section refers to the appendices and the app available to use in conjunction with the book. In the same way that the authors insist that engagement among people is key to organizational success, the book provides opportunities for engagement in each chapter. For example, “Chapter 6: Selfless Leadership” ends with “Training for Selfless Leadership”. The authors ask the reader to “set a timer for five minutes... Now, consider the people who made today possible for you” (p. 141). The chapter ends with tips and reflections, with activities such as having the reader “consider one tangible way you could be of more service to your people” (p. 142). Hougaard and Carter’s book engages its readers in the same they recognize engagement as key to leadership success.

Another unique characteristic of *The Mind of the Leader* is its consideration of leadership as it relates to self-leadership. Prior to delving into the theories behind leading one’s people and the organization, Hougaard and Carter (2018) discuss the need to shut off autopilot and consider one’s own values and definition of happiness. As is the case throughout the remainder of the book, the chapter is sprinkled with in-the-moment exercises to practice the approaches they discuss, such as being present in the moment for one minute. In leadership the book argues, “only the focused survive. And certainly, only the focused excel” (Hougaard & Carter, 2018, p. 48). Focus is the beginning point of any discussion of leadership, the authors argue, and it should be the continued center of the successful leader’s work. Perhaps the most applicable parts of the text come next with the sections on leading your people and leading your organization. These chapters address common leadership topics, such as understanding emotions and unconscious biases, but also offer unique viewpoints on such things as “the dangers of empathy” and wise compassion. Many may disagree with the premise of dangerous empathy, which presents the argument that “empathy has some pitfalls that every leader should understand” (p. 109).

The final four chapters of the book, which encompasses Part Three, gets to the meat of what many leaders from various stages want- true guidance on leading their organizations effectively. Beginning from the base of organizational cultures, the chapter opens arguing “Most organizations talk about the importance of people, but few create cultures in which people are truly seen as the core of the company” (Hougaard & Carter, 2001, p. 159). Rather than treating, the company’s knowledge workers like tools, leader should inspire their teams to create and innovate through collaboration. This final part of the book provides even more concrete

strategies for creating a culture that values people. Using examples from companies like, Accenture, the authors urge leaders to model distraction-free focus that prioritizes the human first. The leader will finish this part of the text with clear strategies for focus in their organization, such a promoting physical movement, common policies to enact for mindful meetings, and even ways to use healthy food to increase mental performance. More than even the previous two parts of the book, Part Three uses the knowledge gained in previous chapters and applies them to real-life scenarios leaders face in creating a new people-centered culture.

Overall, Hougaard and Carter's *The Mind of the Leader* proves to be both engaging in its real-life examples and also useful in the practices and tips each chapter offers. Based on the authors' research of over a decade, the book talks the talk and walks the walk when it comes to engagement. Rather than offering lofty ideas of how to be a people-centered leader, Hougaard and Carter (2018) reference well-known companies such as Lego and Marriott while also pausing chapters to have readers practice their techniques for mindfulness. Each three parts of the text is a reiteration of the principles guiding the MSC Leadership philosophy, so at times the content can seem redundant between the parts. However, *The Mind of the Leader* is approachable to business and education professionals alike and provides concrete guidance on creating a more people-centered leadership style.