

***Exemplary Leadership Practices: Learning From the Past to Enhance Future School Leadership.* By Peter R. Litchka. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. ISBN: 9781475819663.**

Blending an ability to tell stories and reference leaders both famous and humble in reputation, Peter Litchka – Director of Education Leadership at Loyola University (Maryland) – delivers to his readers: *Exemplary Leadership Practices: Learning from the past to enhance future school leadership*. In doing so, he creates a treasure-map to navigate through the often-complicated waters of educational leadership. In this book, the treasures are useful anecdotes and examples to reflect upon throughout a career. By romanticizing the actions of former famous leaders and ‘homegrown’ educational leaders, Litchka provides a motivational read for leaders. While this may not be a go-to resource for an inexperienced educator seeking a step-by-step guide on surviving as a leader, it can certainly prove to be a great book to pick up every now and again when looking for that extra boost to persevere, overcome and lead with vigour.

It seems that Litchka’s own firsthand experiences at a superintendent workshop was the catalyst for this book. It was at this workshop where he was reintroduced to the value and power of stories, and about the power of learning from the past to enhance future educational leadership. This appears to be the objective of the book: to learn from great examples of the past and present, to build upon a foundation of educational leadership tactics. The author wields stories of great leaders from the past, as well as current educational ‘heroes’, to highlight exemplary leaderships and provide: “...learning, for not only those who wish to be school leaders but also for those who are in positions of school leadership” (Litchka, 2016, p. xxi).

Throughout this book it is hard to escape the sense of care that Litchka has for his fellow educators. While not feeling like an exhaustive list of rules, it reads more like a compilation of anecdotes to succeed in a lengthy career of educational leadership. The book is divided up into five (5) sections, each dedicated to a facet of educational leadership. Each section contains entertaining historical accounts of famous leaders, many who lead outside of the classroom by example, and paired with an overall skill that a strong leader should possess.

Section one (entitled: Know Thyself) refers to being comfortable in yourself and the formal/informal roles of leadership and relationships. One striking quote, which sets the tone for the section is: “...the most critical role of any leader in any type of environment is to instill spirit, zest and life within the organization...the first step in accomplishing this is for the leader himself or herself to search and find meaning in their own life – both personal and professional...and then enable others to do the same” (p. 6). Litchka then pairs this with a historical reference to Woodrow Wilson’s rise to prominence in US politics. The next section (entitled: The Magic Behind the Meaning) speaks to a leader’s ability to motivate and lead through symbolic leadership. There is quite a striking comparison to the groundbreaking movements of Ataturk’s abolishment of the fez, as

well as Gandhi's push to have citizens of India dress in Indian garb, with a wonderful story of a leader and the 'art' of the high-five (p. 32).

Section three (entitled: From Chrysalis to Butterfly) refers to effective change – both popular and unpopular – and how a leader must embody transformational leadership. The author uses the anecdote of Gandhi's change from lawyer to the activist he is more renowned for, and contrasts this with a new female educator looking to change the status quo. Litchka makes this bold comparison to demonstrate a leader's ability to assess certain situations and adapt where necessary. Section four (entitled: Thinking About Thinking) speaks to the highly effective nature of self-reflection and "...to move slowly and surely with [a] concept" (p. 74). It harkens to the notion of being a reflective and thoughtful leader, in light of a constant barrage of achievement indicators, stake holder expectations and a rapidly advancing 'tech' world. The author exemplifies this point by referencing Charles Dickens's writer's block and a leader who proposes a book club as a tool of self-reflection. Lastly, in section five (entitled: Surviving and Thriving), the author uses the impressive example of Golda Meir's iconic rise to political leadership in Israel with a leader's ability to overcome obstacles and persevere in the face of daunting challenges and resilience.

After encountering the first historical anecdote, many would assume that the tone of the book would only consist of historical accounts, and unattainable political or social achievements. This is not the case. Litchka does a fine job of mirroring historical accounts with humble stories of achievement. It is in these comparisons where the book's strengths lie. *Exemplary Leadership Practices: Learning From the Past to Enhance Future School Leadership* does a good job of using stories as a foundation on which to develop the author's point; that of course being that we can learn from the past. Peter Litchka also effectively contrasts historical leaders with modern ones to highlight commonalities between historical icons and everyday educational leaders; ultimately painting a scenario that is empowering. A reader may be able to read these anecdotes and think: "I can accomplish this as well!"

While it does tickle the fancy of the reader to recall how leaders such as Golda Meir or Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, overcame challenges to formulate their own perspectives on how to lead, these stories seem antiquated and less practical for a new educational leader in 2018. Litchka was likely aware of this and provided far more effective stories of modern educators, who embody the actions of former leaders, but in a modern and relatable context. Upon further reflection of these stories, perhaps the book would have been a more effective learning tool had it contained more examples of modern educators in their field, rather than lengthy descriptions of past leaders outside of the classroom. Yet it was these historical reflections that made it an extremely enjoyable read, so they certainly serve a purpose.

While the book does make for an entertaining read, it often seems as though the anecdotes and reflections are nothing more than observed learning from an experienced educator. As mentioned previously, the anecdotes make for fascinating looks at

leadership through a variety of lenses, but there is little reference about how leading like *x person* leads to more success in an educational setting.

While Litchka does a great job of finding professional examples of teachers who reflect the qualities or characteristics displayed by these historical persons, the accounts are merely recanted from interviews with leaders in their fields and lack any evident that these types of leadership approaches were ultimately successful. While statistics and facts often make for tedious reading, in this instance some concrete information may have a lasting impact.

Furthermore, while the anecdotes make for excellent reading, the takeaways for a leader were not quite clear. Again, the author was likely aware of this, so he included a subsection within each section entitled: Learning for Leading. It is here, arguably, where Litchka provides the most useful information for future leaders. In fact, it is fair to state that he could have included more of the Learning for Leading sections, and less anecdotal evidence of leadership in action. For example, in the section entitled “Thinking About Thinking”, the author provides an extremely effective list of how to include reflection in our professional lives. He begins by wholly admitting to the strains and stresses the modern leader falls prey to: “It seems that more and more is being expected, all within the same amount of time. School leadership, for many, is becoming more of doing and much less of thinking” (p. 76). He then lists methods of self-reflection, team reflection and a rationale for further effective reflection (p.77). This proves to be the strongest takeaway from the 15-page section.

Ultimately, “*Exemplary leadership practices: Learning from the past to enhance future school leadership*” does an excellent job of treating its readers to an interesting journey through former and current leadership tales. The strength of the read comes from Peter Litchka’s ability to juxtapose the past with modern leadership examples. The book proves to be slightly long-winded at times, with less practical applications and more anecdotal examples. However, if a reader enters this experience with that in mind, they will find a satisfying read with some unlikely new role models to possibly mirror on their own journey through educational leadership.

Litchka’s effort is an engaging read. Perhaps it is the nature of an educational book to assume that it will teach something; and to a point, it does just that. The treasures of Litchka’s book – if the original treasure map analogy is recycled – are in the anecdotes. Plenty of stories, historical examples and modern triumphs both inspire and teach. While this book is not necessarily the perfect guide for a new leader looking for some handy tips and steps to lead and survive, this book does inspire future leaders by making them feel part of a legacy of leadership that spans decades.

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