

The Unseen Leader: How History Can Help Us Rethink Leadership

By Martin Gutman
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This provocative book starts with a statement, “*The mistaken belief that the best leaders are those who generate the most noise and sensational activity is the most dramatic circumstances*” (Gutmann, 2023, pp. 2-3). This is what the author calls “Action Fallacy”, which causes real problems. That is celebrating the wrong role models and leadership qualities and misunderstanding what makes an effective leader. Thus, he intends to tell a new leadership story based on three overlooked- Roald Amundsen, Toussaint Louverture, Gertrude Bell- and one misinterpreted- Winston Churchill- characters, claiming that we need to celebrate leaders, but not for wrong reasons (Gutmann, 2023, p. 14).

Instead of the conventional “Action Fallacy” that defines leadership as individual heroes and crisis response, the new narrative hinges on a different definition: leadership through successful outcomes. This is why, unlike most leadership books, he considers Shackleton an ineffective leader, as he “*was unsuccessful in achieving the goal he himself had set is obvious. During his expedition, he did not come anywhere near the South Pole, nor did he cross the continent*” (Gutmann, 2023, p. 9). However, the actual problem that conventional leadership scholars do not see about him is that “*it was a crisis of his own*

making.” For Gutmann, Shackleton serves as a cautionary tale, while Roald Amundsen, who achieved his goals without such drama, should become the exemplary leader. This reframing extends beyond Shackleton, challenging conventional leadership narratives that elevate charisma and crisis management over consistent, effective outcomes.

Consequently, a new leadership story is needed because the leader is not the one who battles against a crisis but rather the one who reads his environment so well that the crisis is minimized or avoided altogether (Gutmann, 2023, p. 17). While the former is more likely to entertain people, the latter is the one he aims for (Gutmann, 2023, p. 170). Although it is not that fun, “*boring management matters.*”

This book demands attention. Its bold arguments shatter conventional wisdom about leadership, forcing readers to question long-held assumptions. While the historical figures may be unfamiliar, the author’s central inquiry- “*How can I swim with, instead of against, the current?*”- resonates deeply. It whispers a compelling truth: Effective leadership often requires more quiet strength than bluster. Overall, this book is not about recognizing names or figures; it is all about embracing a new type of leadership.

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Reference

Gutmann, M. (2023), *The Unseen Leader: How History Can Help Us Rethink Leadership*, Springer, Cham.