

## Leadership Bullshit you say?

Translated review by Patrick Vermeren, Monday October 12 2015.

*Leadership BS. Fixing workplaces and careers one truth at a time.* Jeffrey Pfeffer

Jeffrey Pfeffer, professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business doesn't shy hard words. He seems to be a fan of the belief that 'desperate diseases must have desperate remedies'. He is a leading figure in the Evidence Based Management movement (see [www.CEBMA.org](http://www.CEBMA.org)). I admit I was quite skeptical when I started reading this book, as I was not always convinced of the good level of evidence produced in the past. But I subsequently read the book during the past weekend in merely 1,5 days and writing this review already today.

Even if this book is clearly written from an American (US) perspective, referring to local top managers and such phenomena as the immense pay-gap between the average CEO-wage and the wage of the average worker (whereas we Europeans tend to look at the difference with the lowest paid worker), it teaches us, Europeans, important lessons too.

First of all, there is his virulent attack on the leadership industry, with its many pseudoscientists and romantic and heroic stories of leadership (we Belgians have the honor of figuring in this book, albeit taking the form of criticism on Vlerick Business School). It reminds me of a recent hype – the totally pseudoscientific claims made by Frederic Laloux, maintaining humans are in a stage of super development and have three instead of one brain (one extra in our heart with the size of that of a “mouse or a small laboratory rat” and one in our guts with the size of a cat-brain). This guy goes on with complex reasoning to conclude that we can better get rid of the majority of leaders, replace them with procedures and trust (all) employees, even if it comes to decisions involving millions of dollars (*Reinventing Organisations*). This BS is promoted by yet another Belgian business school, I am almost too ashamed to admit. He also takes on the overwhelming amount of books on leadership: everyone who has ever led people seems to feel the urge to write a book on the subject. He writes raises the issue of the vast number of consultants, coaches and trainers that act as self-declared leadership experts, without having had a good education or without making an effort to understand the academic literature (let alone making a critical appraisal of it). He also does not spare his academic peers (they seem like a bunch of extremely naive left-wing activists, rather than thorough, neutral scientists. They rather promote concepts such as modestly, authentic leadership (what if he is a bully?), honesty, trust and servant leadership. Not that Pfeffer finds it unimportant or denies their evidence. His main critique is that top managers more often than not display the opposite behavior: they are often extremely dominant and even aggressive; they manipulate, lie and deceive, give themselves extra benefits and pay raises whilst cutting down the salaries of their staff carrying out the work and so on. He finally raises another issue: the way we select leaders makes we select more selfish and untrustworthy leaders.

Pfeffer asks the same two questions to both academics and consultants: what is the frequency of authentic or servant leadership, modesty etc.? And second: what proof do you have your uplifting and inspiring stories about such leaders has made any difference? Did these rare behaviors become more common? The answer, my friend, is not even blowing in the wind.

Pfeffer explicitly pleads to face and handle this truth. He suggests collaborators should arm themselves... by acting selfishly too, just like the leaders. He also rejects another naïve belief, that of the existence of a so-called (implicit) psychological contract, like expecting the company will take care of you in the future, based on your past performance and effort. What counts for companies is what you will be worth in the future. We see proof of that every time a crisis occurs and restructuring and layoffs are needed.

This book is a must read, because it offers a breath of fresh air amongst the many soft calls we hear lately. The calls for leaderless organizations (been there, done that – it doesn't work – see the Substitutes for Leadership research tradition), full-blown participation in decision making or company practices like the one advocated by former Semco CEO, Ricardo Semler (only the 'romantic' side of it is highlighted, not the dark side of it such as six-monthly evaluations of one's peers, leading to a staggering 60% churn). A leader is a leader and (s)he needs different styles and approaches for different situations.

I therefore accept the imperfections in the book. Pfeffer sometimes refers to evolutionary psychology (EP) but seems to do a little bit of cherry picking: he emphasizes the selfish side of humans, whereas EP has a lot to say about the innate inclination towards collaboration (in fact it considers it a stronger drive among 'average' people). He misses important research by the champions' league of EP, such as Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, Steven Pinker, David Buss, Robert Kurzban and some others. He still relies too much on commercial research (often surveys or polls) that is not subjected to peer review. If in the academic world scientific fraud is so common as we lately discovered, I wouldn't bet on the research conclusions by commercial companies. Finally, there are the disturbing references to the fraudulent Freud and to debatable sources such as Jim Collins' *Good to Great*. Almost every scientist who ever read that book can only confirm what Phil Rosenzweig wrote about it in *The Halo Effect*: it is bad science based on hindsight bias and halo-effects. But these shortcomings evaporate into the thin air compared to the general drift of the book and Pfeffer's strong logic.

Pfeffer is pragmatic and realistic. First, he proposes to help people to get over their naïve expectations and to fend for themselves. Second, he suggests abandoning the strategy of telling uplifting and inspirational stories about rare examples during development sessions. Training people will remain a necessity but will lead to nowhere if we don't redesign the system. Just like evolutionary psychologists, Pfeffer recognizes the importance of the context. The context is the input for our behavior and will steer it. Here is a handful of his ideas to make the context more likely to produce effective leadership behavior: change the governance of organization, devolve more power, including to employees, install work councils, promote leaders from within, have leaders elected and evaluated from the bottom-up, make them accountable for their style, punish their bad behavior and reward them for good behavior and such outcomes as their capacity to retain talent, and so on.

But once again, Pfeffer has no illusion (in contrast to so many others) that the second option will be easy. I think he is right: such contextual or system changes must be accepted and supported by those holding power. And they will not give away their

power and benefits without a fight. If there is a book that you need to read rather sooner than later, this is it!

Patrick Vermeren

Author

President of the not-for-profit organization *Evidence Based HRM* in Belgium and the Netherlands.