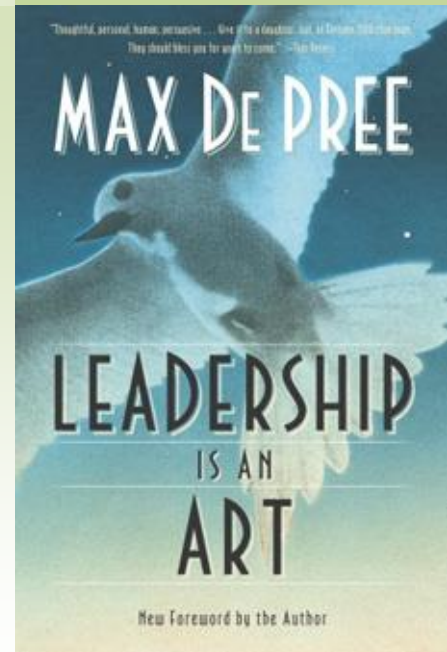


“...making a meaningful difference in the lives of those who permit leaders to lead.” (p. 22).

[Volume 1, Issue 1]

Leadership is an Art: A critical analysis by Megha Khulbe



Summary

Max De Pree was the CEO of Herman Miller, a fine furniture company that was started by his father in 1923. De Pree utilized the principles of servant leadership in his company to empower employees and improve production. Specifically in this book, De Pree discusses several key points such as participative management, roving leadership and the gifts of followers to illustrate his vision of servant leadership in his organization. He develops these points through anecdotes and experiences through his years working at Herman Miller. What makes these ideas so strong is De Pree’s obvious passion and support for the topic and a genuine regard for his employees. “I am convinced that the best management process for today’s environment is participative management based on covenantal relationships.” (p. 61). His belief is unwavering and palpable as the reader is drawn into the stories that are described in this book.

“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up progress of an artful leader.” (p. 11).

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2 Max De Pree



What is servant leadership?

“Liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible.”

Max De Pree brings a highly moral and ethical perspective to the topic of leadership. He emphasizes that leaders are meant to serve followers to help them reach their full potential in a professional and personal context. “Servant leadership emphasizes that leaders be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them, and nurture them. Servant leaders put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities” (Northouse, 2016). De Pree shares that effective servant leadership is based on strong relationships, a conducive atmosphere and an aim to empower followers. “The measure of leadership is not the quality of the head, but the tone of the body.” (p. 12). In this case, leadership is not about the leader at all, but about how to serve the follower to the highest degree.

De Pree on developing relationships

Steps for developing solid relationships

1. Respect people and the diversity of their gifts
2. Understand that what we believe precedes policy and practice
3. Agree on the rights of work
4. Understand the respective role and relationship of contractual agreements and covenants
5. Understand that relationships count more

“Leadership is more tribal than scientific, more a weaving of relationships than an amassing of information...” (p. 3).

We all have gifts

“Channeled correctly and integrated properly, our diversity can be our greatest strength.” (p. 89).

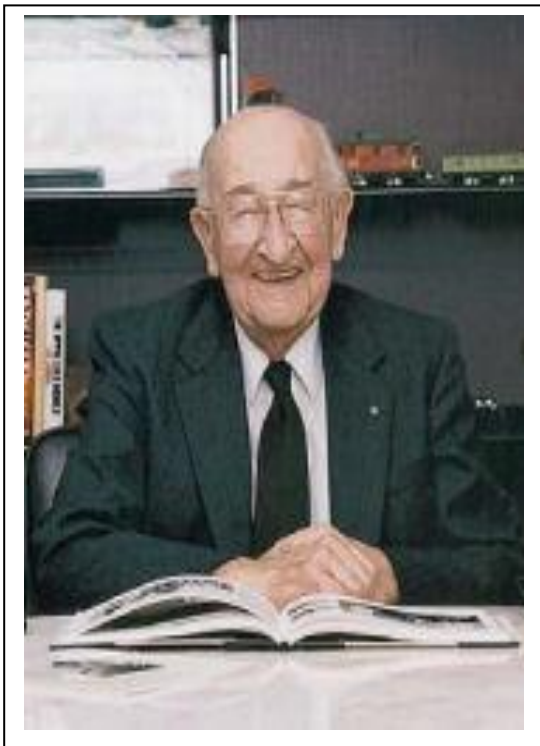
A frequent theme in Leadership is an Art is the diversity of gifts that all employees bring to the company. “Everyone comes with certain gifts-but not the same gifts. True participation and enlightened leadership allow these gifts to be expressed in different ways and at different times.” (p. 26). It is clear De Pree truly appreciates everyone that works at Herman Miller. He is quick to praise others and encourages them to develop their personal and professional selves through training, education and especially with a moral and ethical perspective in mind. “Life is more than reaching our goals. As individuals and as a group we need to reach our potential.” (p. 50). There is a deeper assumption that we can only be truly effective in our professional roles if each individual person is nurtured and supported in all endeavors to fully develop themselves as a whole. This idea is emphasized through specific stories that highlight how various employees have contributed to the company through their explicit expertise, knowledge and insight. Their gifts may go beyond a professional scope. One particular story emphasizes the brilliance of the millwright who wrote magnificent poetry. The anecdote stresses the importance of sincerely knowing followers and recognizing their skills and talents, both in a personal and professional context. When the gifts of others are genuinely recognized, “...the art of leadership lies in polishing and liberating and enabling those gifts.”(p. 10). Leadership is actually about the followers, not the leader.

 Herman Miller

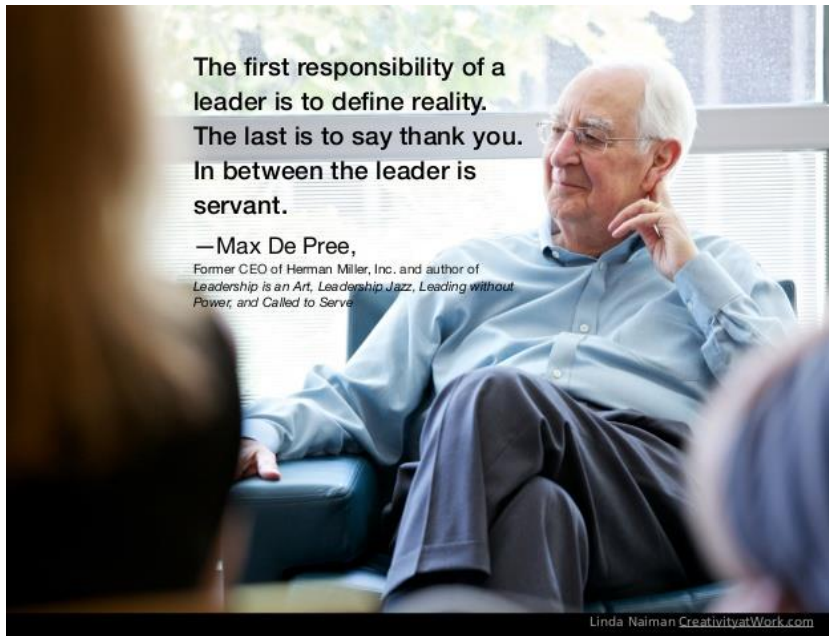


Elegant leaders always reach for completeness." (p. 144).

"An elegant company frees its members to be their best. Elegant leaders free the people they lead to do the same." (p. 142).



"Hierarchy and equality are not mutually exclusive. Hierarchy provides connections. Equality makes hierarchy responsive and responsible." (p. 145).



Roving Leadership

“Understanding and accepting diversity enables us to see that each of us is needed. It also enables us to begin to think about being abandoned to the strengths of others, of admitting that we cannot know or do everything.” (p. 9).

Another key point that De Pree signifies is roving leadership. Leadership is not static and based on position, but expressed by all individuals at certain times. “Roving leadership is the expression of the ability of hierarchical leaders to permit others to share ownership of problems-in effect, to take possession of a situation” (p. 49). This idea emphasizes that anyone can be a leader in different situations and it is the responsibility of the supervisor and organization to enable others to do so. The concept that all people have worthwhile gifts supports the idea that everyone can contribute as a leader in different situations. Roving leadership requires a solid development of relationships and trust for a person in a supervisory position to allow subordinates to come forward and lead. “Power must be shared for an organization or a relationship to work” (p. 105). Roving leadership allows an employee to step in and take charge in certain circumstances when their gifts, expertise or knowledge enables them to be the best person to make decisions. It empowers employees when they know that their talents and experiences are valued and they can directly contribute to the outcomes of an organization. Trust is a crucial element here. It is suggested that “we must trust one another to be accountable for our own assignments.” (p.116). However, De Pree does not further discuss consequences or what should happen if employees do not fulfill their obligations to the best of their abilities. For practicality, a further discussion of such consequences would be beneficial. De Pree is indeed a passionate supporter of all Herman Miller employees to be leaders and he nurtures this in every way.

Communication



De Pree on
communication:

“There may be no single thing more important in our efforts to achieve meaningful work and fulfilling relationships than to learn and practice the art of communication.” (p. 108).

5 De Pree on change:

“In the end, it is important to remember that we cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are.” (p. 100).



Participative Management

“Everyone has the right and the duty to influence decision making and to understand the results. Participative management guarantees that decisions will not be arbitrary, secret, or closed to questioning. Participative management is not democratic. Having a say differs from having a vote.” (p. 25).

Believing in people and their gifts is central to the idea of participative management. Each individual in an organization is expected and encouraged to use their skills and talents to improve processes and production, make suggestions and make decisions. A key aspect is to create an environment of strong relationships where the opinions and ideas of others are valued. Corporate and personal value systems are integrated into the work place to create an inclusive atmosphere to encourage participation. One way that participative management is achieved is through employees being stockholders. Herman Miller supports productivity and profit sharing through the allotment of company stock to anyone working at the company for over a year. Employees acting as owners are common and assist the participative management process because then employees have a personal stake in the success of the company. Employee as owner increases commitment, loyalty, creative thinking, and roving leadership. Finally, De Pree briefly explores the idea “that for many of us there is a fundamental difference between goals and rewards” (p. 10). This connects to the difference between transformational and transactional leadership (Northouse, 2016). While most people require transactional interactions, it is the transformational aspects of an occupation that create satisfaction, motivation and empowerment. Through the use of their personal gifts, each individual can participate fully in their role in the organization.

“People are the heart and spirit of all that counts. Without people, there is no need for leaders.” (p. 13).


The Good

Leadership is an Art is an easy read with some thought provoking ideas. The message is clear: servant leadership is the optimal way to develop the potential of followers, practice participative management and ensure success of an organization. Having a solid vision, genuine relationships with followers and encouraging roving leadership throughout the company leads to a joyful working environment for all. The format of the book, wider margins and double spacing, encourages analysis and comments as the reader is struck by a particular idea, which is urged by the author in his introduction.

De Pree develops these ideas through some interesting and inspiring stories that highlight examples of servant leadership at Herman Miller. He is quick to share his appreciation and admiration of others when they exemplify his ideals, pointing out his own development through the actions and knowledge of others.

Max De Pree is a respected and successful businessman. His perspective of leadership gains credence through the accomplishments of his organization. He has recognized and put these leadership ideas into practice in the real world, sharing his experiences and not just leadership theories. Through this he is able to present a viable vision for servant leadership in a business context, where profit and the bottom line are essential to the advancement of the company.

De Pree makes his belief, that developing people and their unique gifts through service is key, accessible to everyone in various types of organizations. Certainly, this book provides some inspiration for leaders to enhance their own models to leadership towards a more service oriented style.



“Joy is an essential ingredient of leadership. Leaders are obligated to provide it.” (p. 146).

The Bad

Nonetheless, this book also demonstrates some deficiencies that detract from the idealistic nature of the message. First, the writing is very repetitive and the style sometimes less informative and more preaching. The message is certainly clear, but the author harps on the same broad ideas, sometimes without sufficient evidence or explanation to fully develop a vision of his opinions.

The book does not have a natural flow or cohesion. Each section highlights some central anecdote that is not connected to the next, and thus the book fails to gain momentum. The viewpoints presented are very idealistic and sometimes abstract. High ideals have to be balanced with practicality and the financial bottom line. While De Pree does allude to this in some sections of the book, it is a vague connection and the reader is lead to assume that implementing service leadership ideals will naturally lead to a profitable outcome.

As the CEO of Herman Miller, most the author’s anecdotes are about his experiences in his company. However, this is a narrow scope for fully demonstrating the validity of the concepts presented. Also, De Pree includes a religious note in the book and attempts to connect his religious beliefs to being more humane as a servant to others. Clearly, De Pree connects his religious beliefs with moral ideals of how to treat others. This could be accomplished through appealing to the moral and ethical conscience of the reader without a religious connotation. Framing his ideas in this way may alienate some readers that do not share his beliefs.

The Reality

Overall, I would recommend this book, with some cautionary notes. The book presents the concepts of servant leadership and the author's experiences of how this looks in his organization. This book is not a "how-to" manual on ways to implement servant leadership but will provide some inspiration, guidelines and anecdotes to direct the reader in their quest to further illustrate what servant leadership might look like in a well-run and profitable business. It is an easy read with some solid quotes to evoke a vision for servant leadership.

Be prepared to be inspired!



"Belief
..... precedes practice."

*"Leaders choose a person,
not a position." (p. 20).*

References:

De Pree, Max. (2004). *Leadership is an Art*. New York, NY: Currency Doubleday.

Northouse, P. G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

IS DE PREE WORTH A READ?

What to expect:

- *A passion for serving others*
- *Some broad ideas about servant leadership in practice*
- *Personal and professional stories*
- *An easy to read format*
- *Inspiring quotes and observations*
- *A moral perspective*