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## Book Review

**Bolden, R., Gosling, J. and Hawkins, B. (Eds),**  
**Exploring Leadership: Individual, Organizational and Societal**  
**Perspectives, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 2023, Oxford University Press,**  
**Pages: 408, Price: GBP 45 (LKR 18,000)**  
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## Introduction

*Exploring Leadership: Individual, Organizational and Societal Perspectives* is a supremely helpful resource for students, managers and scholars of leadership interested in understanding the ‘state of the art’ of leadership studies. The authors have managed to distinguish this book from other textbook-type resources on the topic of leadership by adopting an explicitly critical, interdisciplinary and multilevel approach while remaining balanced in their assessments. They do so through a particularly accessible presentation of the material without, in my view at least, sacrificing scholarly rigour and conceptual depth. For instance, students interested in

using this book will find chapter outlines and summaries, and links to supporting material such as short videos and tools to track their learning helpful.

## Content

The book is structured into five parts, each containing two chapters.

*Part 1* focuses on ‘mapping the terrain’ of leadership studies. I find it helpful how they problematise the sometimes unstated assumption that leadership is the “panacea of our times” (p. 9), among other things, by showing the reader how the field of leadership studies has evolved since the early 1900s. They illustrate the theoretical and practical challenges and complexities related to views that leadership can somehow solve organisational and societal problems with reference to a case study from Singapore’s civil service.

Part 1 also contains an outline of the authors’ evidence-backed position from which this book is written. The book responds to the “call to redress the balance accorded to individual and collective accounts of leadership” (p. 31), contributes to reframing “how we recognise, reward and develop leaders” (p. 32), emphasises “the need to review our methodologies and approaches to the study of leadership” (p. 31) and does so in the context of the challenges brought to the fore by the Anthropocene.

*Part 2* of the book outlines individual perspectives on leadership. It starts with the conventional approaches to leadership, in terms of which leadership is about traits, skills and competencies. In this context, they use some of the well-known questions faced by leadership scholars and students, which would offer readers an entry point to approaches and concepts that could seem arcane. They ask, for example, whether some people are born to lead as an introduction to trait-based approaches to leadership, or what leaders do as an introduction to more situational or context-based approaches to leadership. In line with the approach outlined earlier in the book, the authors also seek to make space for reflection on the role of followers and how their agency and proactivity are related to individual leaders.

From my perspective, a noteworthy value-add of this section is the chapter on the “emotional dynamics” of leadership (p. 111). I find their framing of transformational leadership and related work on leadership and charisma as leadership in the realm of emotions. This makes for a convincing transition to authentic leadership theory and reflection on the role of emotions and related topics such as storytelling.

In *Part 3*, the authors shift their perspective to that of the organisation. In the first chapter, they outline and discuss in some sense ‘classical’ topics related to leadership: leadership and strategy, performance and change. Again, the framing should be appreciated: rather than presenting leadership and strategy, for instance, as the main or only useful approach to leadership, the authors provide clues on how to understand the ways in which a theory such as strategic leadership (see p. 148) could be useful. At the very same time, this framing also points towards the boundaries and limitations of such theories. In line with their stated approach, the authors also provide critical perspectives. When it comes to strategic leadership, for example, the authors remind the reader that “strategic leadership is not just the product of the leader... but requires collaboration and the development of a sense of shared values” (p. 154), thereby emphasising factors that go beyond the individual leader.

I particularly appreciated the second chapter of this part, which includes a reflection on leadership, power, and politics – topics that, in my view, deserve more attention than they currently receive in contemporary leadership scholarship. The distinction between power as a personal attribute, power as legitimised by followers and power as embedded within social systems is enlightening (see p. 190), as is the well-known but less-often-operationalised distinction between small ‘p’ and big ‘P’ politics (see pp. 192-197)

*Part 4* explores the intersection between leadership and societal matters and perspectives. The authors reflect, for example, on the extent to which leadership in organisations is different from leadership in communities. They do so by diving into some of the conceptual challenges related to pinpointing the notion of leadership in communities. Unlike many books of this nature, the authors also discuss important yet under-researched topics such as ancestral leadership and the relationship between leadership and national culture. Of particular interest to me is the substantive section on leadership and place (see pp. 242-245).

In many respects, this section concludes with the ‘so what?’ question that is implicitly, or at least supposed to be, at the core of our reflection on leadership. They do so by exploring the potential contribution of leadership to addressing global risks and grand challenges. They rightly place particular emphasis on matters related to sustainability and climate change.

In the final section of the book, *Part 5*, the authors outline some of the most important cross-cutting and emerging perspectives that students, managers and

leadership scholars would do well to consider, if they are not already doing so. They ask, for example, what current and emerging leadership scholarship says about creating more inclusive workspaces and how leadership and gender intersect. In this discussion, they provide a fresh perspective on well-known concepts such as the glass cliff phenomenon. The authors also include a stimulating discussion on leadership and digital disruption, and they explore topical themes such as digital surveillance. This section also contains a critical discussion on leadership and ethics.

## **Conclusion**

*Exploring Leadership: Individual, Organizational and Societal Perspectives* is a highly accessible, well-argued, academically grounded and deeply thoughtful exploration of leadership studies from a critical yet constructive perspective. The book is practical in the sense that the authors have attempted and succeeded in asking how theoretical and conceptual advances help us understand the potential personal, organisational and societal impact of leadership research. Rather than merely attempting to summarise the main lines of thought and key fault lines in the field – already no mean feat – the authors succeeded in presenting the field not only from a critical perspective but from the perspective of people engaged and committed to developing a field that has meaning and impact. This explains why additional stimulating topics and thoughts are scattered throughout the book.

## **About the Editors**

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