Summer Reading for School Leaders

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by Larry Lashway

In the distinctive rhythms of the school year, summer has always been a cherished time of rest and renewal. Even time-pressed principals have been able to throttle down and reflect on the fact that educational leadership is a heck of a lot easier without the presence of students and teachers.

In recent years, however, this relative tranquility has been threatened by federal and state pressure for ever-higher performance. As a result, many principals find themselves working as hard as ever in the summer.

This Research Roundup offers a compromise for principals who are seeking decompression from the stress of the school year, but fear leaving any stone unturned in their quest for school improvement. All five of the books discussed here are highly readable—perhaps not the kind of reading to accompany a day at the beach, but perfectly compatible with a hammock and a cold drink. Since all offer insights on leadership from the worlds of business and psychology, principals can avoid yet another tiring rehash of the problems of education.

In the slower pace of summer, school leaders can reflect on the ideas presented in these books, relate them to their own practice, and perhaps come away with a little more wisdom for next year’s challenges.

Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas ask whether different eras produce different kinds of leadership.

Jim Collins draws a distinction between organizations that are great and those that are merely good.

Dietrich Dörner explains why even smart leaders can make bad decisions.

Marshall and Molly Sashkin synthesize current thinking on leadership.

Peter Block puts a positive spin on organizational politics.


Where does leadership come from? Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas freshen an old debate on the origins of leadership with a new hypothesis: The shape of leadership is partly a product of the times.

The authors see clear differences between leaders of the World War II generation and today’s under-35 generation. Those who came of age during World War II defined success as gradually gaining security and control of their lives through loyalty, hard work, and respect for elders. Those who came of age in the 1990s define success in terms of making an immediate difference, with more willingness to take entrepreneurial risks and less willingness to defer to their elders.

Despite these generational differences, Bennis and Thomas found commonalities. All the leaders they interviewed had gone through a “crucible”—a severe personal challenge that
tested their capabilities and allowed them to see themselves as leaders. Some crucibles, such as World War II, are shared within an age group; others are individual experiences (e.g., an illness or period of unemployment). These individuals transformed their personal challenges into leadership through a quality Bennis and Thomas call “adaptive capacity,” the ability to master the challenges and to integrate them into their lives.

The other key commonality of the surveyed leaders was “neotony,” the ability to maintain the qualities normally associated with youth—such as openness, curiosity, a willingness to take risks, and a sense of wonder. They never stop learning.

The authors suggest that some kind of national service year might provide the kind of crucible that could stimulate leadership in American society. School leaders are already going through their own crucible: the accountability demands of the No Child Left Behind Act. Perhaps a decade from now, principals may look back at NCLB as the supreme test that brought out their best leadership qualities.


In the world of leadership research, comparing successful and unsuccessful companies is a time-honored tactic. The theory is simple: Find out what the good leaders are doing and imitate them. The problem is that all too often companies labeled “successful” stumble when the business climate shifts, and what once seemed to be the result of brilliant leadership ends up looking more like simple luck.

In this book, Jim Collins breaks new ground by looking for the difference between companies that are merely successful at a given point in time (good) and those that have sustained a high level of success for at least 15 years (great). What do the great organizations have that the good ones do not?

From an in-depth study of 28 companies, Collins found six characteristics that existed in all the great organizations, but in few of the merely good organizations.

Leadership. Not surprisingly, leaders made a difference—but not the sort of difference that Collins expected. Rather than being heroic, hard-charging egotists, the leaders of great companies were unfailingly humble, downplaying their own achievements, and shunning the spotlight. At the same time, they were fierce and uncompromising in their commitment to organizational excellence.

People first. Leaders of great companies did not set a vision and then hire people who could implement it. Rather, they focused first on hiring the best possible people, confident that the vision and the strategy to fulfill it would emerge.

Facing reality. The leaders of great organizations were clear-headed about reality, declining to sweep bad news and uncomfortable facts under the carpet. They relentlessly asked questions, encouraged honest answers, and took actions accordingly.

Simplicity. The great companies didn’t try to be all things to all people. Rather, they focused on what they passionately cared about, what they were capable of doing, and what worked economically.

A culture of discipline. Great organizations gave their employees considerable freedom and responsibility, but expected them to adhere to organizational priorities.

Technology accelerators. Great companies were selective about technology, using it when it advanced their core mission, ignoring it when it did not.

Anyone who spends much time observing events at the local, state, and national levels quickly learns that very intelligent people are capable of making remarkably poor—even abysmal—decisions. This comes as no surprise to Dörner, a cognitive psychologist who has studied the ways that thinking can go astray. He explains that human thinking evolved in an environment in which quick thinking and snap judgments had survival value, and that people tended to solve problems spontaneously, without worrying much about how they were connected with other problems. Today, by contrast, we live in a highly complex society in which solving a problem here sends out ripples that create a new problem there.

Using laboratory studies supplemented by real-world examples (such as the Chernobyl disaster), Dörner describes the major sources of human error.

**Lack of goal clarity.** People often jump into action without a clear picture of the objective, leading to considerable random, contradictory, or self-defeating behavior.

**Failure to think systemically.** The law of unintended consequences is a major obstacle to good decisions. Egypt’s Aswan dam succeeded in its goal of increasing electricity, but also disrupted the Nile’s natural fertilization cycle. This led to heavy use of chemical fertilizers, which in turn raised costs and increased water pollution.

**Difficulty in visualizing decisions over time.** We are strongly dominated by the present and do not find it easy to mentally track how a complex decision will play out over several weeks or several years. Without making a conscious effort to reflect on future developments, most people behave as though their present circumstances will continue indefinitely.

**Emotional commitment to ineffective strategies.** Dörner points out that people like to see themselves as competent problem-solvers, and thus often spend considerable energy defending a poor strategy rather than seeking better ideas.

Dörner offers no simple formulas for avoiding mistakes, which is precisely his point: Relying on simple formulas is often what gets people in trouble.

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Leadership studies in the early 20th century were based on the assumption that effective leadership was a matter of having certain personal traits. Later research focused on the behaviors of leaders, and eventually to the notion that how leaders responded to particular situations determined their success. More recently, attention has turned to the relationship between leaders and followers.

Marshall and Molly Sashkin note that none of these efforts to determine the essence of leadership has yielded a comprehensive or universally accepted explanation, but that all offer useful perspectives. Their book is an effort to produce a usable synthesis of these various lines of research.

They use the synthesis to promote the notion of transformational leadership, which assumes that the most effective and lasting kind of leadership centers on the creation of shared meaning and morally grounded action. In an oft-used phrase, transformational leaders don’t just do things right, they do the right things.

The Sashkins pinpoint factors at the heart of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are self-confident; focused on empowering others; consistently communicate; build
trust; provide opportunities for growth; create a culture that supports organizational goals; and have a vision for the future.

Although focused on theory, the book is lightened by a brisk writing style and practical exercises help readers relate the authors’ concepts to their own situations.

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Block, Peter. **The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987. Available from: Customer Care Center, 10475 Crosspoint Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46256. 256 pages. Paperback $29.95 plus $5.00 shipping; Hardcover $44.00 plus $5.00 shipping. 877-762-2974; fax 800-605-2665; e-mail consumers@wiley.com. Web site: [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

This 1987 work makes the current list not only because it has remained in print but because its message is timelier than ever for harried principals coping with the pressures of NCLB. Written for “the manager in the middle,” Block’s popular book is designed to “support the belief that we have some control over our destiny.”

First, Block wants to demystify organizational politics. “Politics in organizations is like sex was in the 1950s,” he notes. “We knew it was going on, but nobody would really tell us about it.” Second, he wants to establish that politics can be conducted with fairness and integrity, and need not be synonymous with power plays and manipulation.

He defines politics as simply the competition for a fair share of organizational resources that will let us enact our vision of how the organization should accomplish its mission. Since resources are always scarce, political behavior is inevitable but not inherently unhealthy.

However, Block distinguishes between two mind-sets that can lead to very different behaviors. A *bureaucratic outlook* is based on a belief in top-down authority that manifests itself in manipulative tactics in the pursuit of personal power, money, or approval. An *entrepreneurial outlook* is based on empowerment and responsible autonomy, leading to straight-dealing tactics in the pursuit of service, integrity, and making a difference in people’s lives.

Block notes that the entrepreneurial approach is a highly idealistic philosophy that requires courage and a conscious commitment to greatness rather than acceptance of the status quo. He also concedes that certain times and certain environments require a cautious approach.

Block also provides ample practical advice on how to play the political game with integrity. For example, he points out that our co-workers differ not only in the extent to which they agree with us, but the extent to which they are trustworthy. Those perceived as *opponents* (low agreement and high trust) require different tactics than those seen as *adversaries* (low agreement and low trust). Similarly, *bedfellows* (high agreement, low trust) should be approached differently than *allies* (high agreement, high trust).

Because the book is written with middle managers in mind, principals will find considerable relevance for their profession.