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True North: Becoming an Authentic Leader by Bill George

Diana Watts
University of Maryland

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Diana Watts

University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA

Leadership continues to be a pivotal topic for managers, academics, and even documentary filmmakers. From Max Weber's classic study of ideal types of leadership to the GLOBE study of cultural dimensions and leadership behavior to recent films searching to "decode" Steve Jobs's particular leadership style, the issue remains—what does it take to lead and gain followers (Bendix, 1962; House, 2004; Sorkin, 2015)? Bill George's approach in *True North: Becoming an Authentic Leader* (2015) sets out an agenda that celebrates the significance of personal growth. The book is an updated and expanded version of the 2007 edition, including a more diverse and global set of leaders (p. 296). Carefully eschewing any suggestion of embedded traits, the emphasis is on taking charge of individual development. The comparison is made with athletes and musicians, noting that "you must take responsibility" and that this commitment may "take a lifetime to fulfill" (p. 9). *True North* becomes the code phrase for developing an individual blend of authentic abilities and values based on introspection. It is this uniqueness that, George argues, forms the essential basis for modern leadership and success in complex organizations.

George's writing has a specific vantage point, given his own experience as former chairman and chief executive officer (CEO) of Medtronic during the 1990s and his appointment as a senior fellow at the Harvard School of Business (p. 293). George himself represents the model of the scholar-practitioner with a genuine understanding of the applied leadership dilemmas and an appreciation for the conceptual work of key management thought leaders such as Bennis and Drucker (pp. xi–xii). This blended appreciation for both theory and practice has resulted in a book design that can be read at several different levels—individual development exercises, current case studies, and a framework for leadership.

The structure of the book is organized to engage the reader in a shift of perspective from the individual and personal formative experiences to a discussion of leading in an increasingly complex world. George organizes the work into three sections: Part I, Your leadership journey; Part II, Developing as an authentic leader; and Part III, Your true north meets the world. The reader

is invited to work through these levels, moving from inner to outer focus based on a consistent framework that includes cases and, to use George's term, archetypes. For example, Part I, which focuses on the individual, is further divided into a series of cases grouped around (a) your life story, (b) losing your way, and (c) crucibles (p. 10). In the discussion of "losing your way," George identifies familiar examples of very public failures such as Lance Armstrong, Richard Grasso, and Richard Fuld of Lehman Brothers (pp. 45–54). In addition to providing specific examples, George offers a categorization of the distinctive types of failings these cases represent, through archetypes—including "imposters, rationalizers, glory seekers, loners and shooting stars" (pp. 47–48). This combination of narrative detail and categorization by type encourages the reader to draw inferences that extend beyond an individual case to a more generic type of insight across the cases. The final step is providing the reader with specific questions to encourage individual and personal reflections, based in part on the preceding case examples and categories. This returns the focus to the individual's personal leadership qualities and the insight that can be gained through introspection.

Although George considers the top-down, command-style leader to be "twentieth-century," it is clear that he believes the leaders do matter in terms of the potential of their organizations (p. 8). He argues that it is not about specific "characteristics or traits of a leader" and/or only about being "at the top of an organization" in order to lead (p. 9). George's focus is on guiding the individual discovery process leading to introspection, growth, and finally the culmination of a position of "true north" or authentic leadership.

As mentioned, the book benefits from George's experience as former CEO of Medtronic and his current appointment as Professor of Management Practice and Henry B. Arthur Fellow of Ethics at Harvard Business School, in that it is clearly written for the practitioner, and in this he succeeds. His framework is accessible, the cases are well selected, and his tone is both companionable and supportive. Individuals in leadership positions at all levels may find the approach of inner reflection coupled with real-world experiences of well-known leaders to offer an excellent opportunity to gauge their own development against the gold standard of high profile leaders. Academics may appreciate the degree of detail documented here and the anecdotal

Address correspondence to Diana Watts, Trinity Washington University, 125 Michigan Ave., Washington, DC 20017, USA. E-mail: wattsd@trinitydc.edu

insights provided. There may be some critique, however, at the lack of citations, source material, or analysis. Yet this does not detract, given that the academic readers and practitioners may read for different purposes. Still, some practitioners may choose to exercise caution in moving from a particular set of individual experiences to broader and more applicable generalizations. There may be value for an individual to gain a refreshed perspective through identification of key personal experiences and comparison drawn from other leaders. This may serve both to motivate and to enhance development of one's individual leadership abilities. The reader may want to keep in mind that in the complex world George is discussing, individual understanding based on selected narratives and archetypes may prove to be more suggestive than directive.

This brings us to the practitioner–scholar dilemma and the well-known conundrum of experience versus theory. While theory-building and systematic aggregation of data take time, the nuances and real-time changes that contribute to understanding of complex leadership may be more readily gained from life experiences. This is where the academic reader and the practitioner may derive different value from this study. Where the practitioner may appreciate the "received wisdom" from the experience of George and prominent leaders, the academic may gain anecdotal and timely insight into complex decisions from a range of well-placed decision makers. Both add to our understanding of leading from different vantage points and with different purposes.

For those wishing to find a place in the classroom for *True North*, this book is clearly written, and offers engaging examples based on interviews with familiar leaders (Howard Shultz, Jack Welch, David Gergen) and well-known companies (Red Cross, Unilever, Goldman Sachs) (pp. 275–278). Too often, leadership survey texts omit the texture and color of actual organizational dilemmas, and these are amply supplied through well- written vignettes. Used as a course supplement at the undergraduate and graduate levels, it is easy to imagine a range of classroom experiences including role-play and decision debates, as well as thoughtful reflective essays stemming from a close reading of these leadership experiences. *True North* may also be used as intended, providing the basis for individuals to reflect on their own leadership development in a complex world.

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