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MANNING
says, you can be a
LEADER

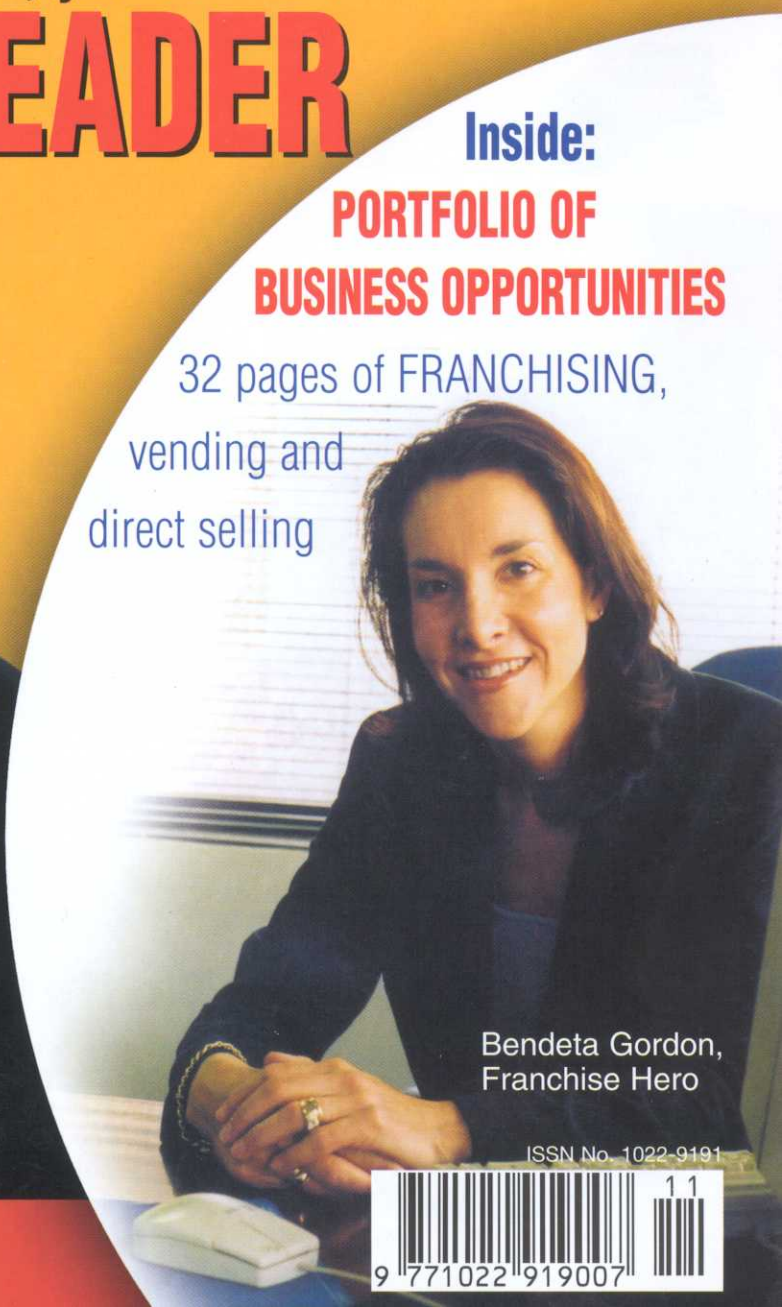
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The essence of LEADERSHIP

With the publication of Discovering the Essence of Leadership, Tony Manning, one of South Africa's top business consultants, has broken new ground on the subject. The book is an astonishing mixture of inspiration and practical business advice. In the opinion of this reviewer, it is the finest work available for the busy businessperson who wants to get to grips with the subject.

Wessel Ebersohn spent time with Tony Manning to learn more.

No idea is more seductive in business than the idea of the great, charismatic leader, the company boss who by sheer power of personality and clarity of vision leads his organisation to one success after another. Just lately though, quite a few of them have seen their stature shrink and their reputations wither.

"Success as a business leader is not a matter of personality type," says Tony Manning. "It has much more to do with the leader having a clear vision about where the company is going, what has to be done to get it there and communicating that vision to the team."

Manning's study of the subject reveals that leaders come in all personality types. From the great charismatic leaders like Jack Welch to low-key leaders like William McKnight, who led 3M for decades, there is no single formula. "A study of perhaps six great business leaders may come to conclusions that are all wrong," says Manning. "A few points that the six have in common may not be the reasons that made them excel."

If we cannot all be among the truly exceptional leadership figures, we can certainly all improve our leadership skills. Manning believes that most people diminish themselves when thinking of themselves as leaders. "No one is perfect," he says. "Welch has a stutter, yet he is the most acclaimed business leader of our time."

"The leader of a business needs a "fingertip sense" of how the business works"

To learn leadership, Manning points to certain fundamental principles that have to be followed. First among these is the fact that you only get results through others. So to achieve success you have to be able to get them optimistic and excited about what they are doing.

He calls this process the leader's strategic conversation. Some heads of businesses will continually tell their staff how tough things are, while another will only point to the opportunities, telling them that they are in a growth market for the company. "Your strategic conversation must have a purpose," he says. "It can inspire your people or demotivate them. Which it does depends on what the leader says - every day."

On a national level, it is common cause that South Africa is short of managers. In the past, many companies were structured

What followers expect

- A leader should give hope of a better future
- A leader should give a sense that he or she knows what to do
- A leader should give direction
- A leader should give you opportunities to learn and grow

"We can all improve our leadership skills"



to serve only the white population. Now the need for managers to take up the increased load is much greater. Ten years ago it was estimated that by the year 2000 South Africa would be short of some 200 000 senior managers. It is probable that the calculation underestimated the problem. The shortage of managers today may be far more severe.

"A manager's job is to bring out the best in his people - this is also the job of a leader"

"To achieve success you have to be able to get your people optimistic and excited about what they are doing"

"The situation is serious, but it is possible to fast-track young people into management positions," says Manning. "We have to accept that we don't have the luxury of time. It can only be done if we offer simple tool kits. I think that too often we present leadership in a way that is unnecessarily complex."

Manning is impatient with the popular idea that leadership and management are two different matters. "Frankly, from any practical point of view, it's nonsense. A manager's job is to bring out the best in his people. This is also the job of a leader. A leader should inspire and give direction. So should a manager."

While Manning likes the principle of promoting from within, he points out that there are times in any business where a manager has to be found outside the company. Nothing is more important than the selection process, but no method of selection is perfect. "Headhunters put people through a barrage of psychometric tests, many of which are useless. A provable record is far more valuable. When recruiting, you do need a deliberate process, but there is always an element of gamble when you appoint someone you don't know well."

If successful business leadership is not fundamentally about charisma, it must be about simpler issues. To Manning, trust is one of these. He tells leaders to be open and honest with staff members. "If you keep everything close to your

chest, especially if you lie to your staff, you destroy the relationship with them. If you want them to trust you, you have to demonstrate trust in them. You have to take the risk of trusting your people.

"A leader's job is not to sit in an ivory tower and think inspired thoughts. If the leader does not know the detail of the business, he will not know what is happening. It is easy to be suckered by grandeur, but this is no way to make a business work."

Manning says that in his experience the most successful business leaders have a "fingertip sense" of how the business works. They know what matters in the business, what makes the difference between good and poor performance. "The

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The priorities of the business being led

- What are the basics that drive this business?
- Does everyone know what the basics are and why they matter?
- What are the consequences of ignoring them and starving them of resources?
- How well do we do them right now?
- What improvements or changes must we make?
- If we do nothing new, what will the consequences be?
- If we really need to make radical changes, how will we manage that process?

leader may need to talk to the shelf packers if the business is retail or truck drivers if the business is transport. Many ambitious people don't aspire to operating at that level, but that intimate knowledge of your business is what it takes to lead successfully."

He points to the fact that one branch or franchise may do brilliantly while another identical one does poorly. "It is a matter of the behaviour of the branch leader," he says. "You find true leadership at every level."

While he teaches that all people have leadership potential, Manning also sees a leader's role as being to bring out the potential in the team. If you think your staff are good, you treat them differently and they respond differently.

Manning believes that because of the shortage of managers in South Africa we are the ideal country in which to learn management. "South Africa is a hothouse of business," he says.

"It is the ideal environment in which to become a generalist. The problems our managers have to face are of every sort. You have to learn fast and you have to deal with every kind of pressure. AIDS, globalization, the labour laws, the unions...ours is a stimulating and tough environment in which you learn fast. For the young manager it is a unique opportunity to develop." **S**

Discovering the Essence of Leadership by Tony Manning is published by Zebra Press and is available in all bookstores.