Leadership 101

"Can Leadership Be Taught?" by Peter Coy, in *Cornell Magazine* (Nov.–Dec. 1998), Cornell Alumni Federation, 55 Brown Rd., Ithaca, N.Y. 14850–1247.

Tired of hearing how their graduates excel as analysts but are lacking in the right stuff as future captains of industry, more and more of the nation's business schools are trying to teach that elusive quality called *leadership*.

One sign of the swelling interest was the emergence of an academic journal on the subject, the *Leadership Quarterly*, now a decade old. In 1994, the Harvard Business School launched a required leadership course for its first-year students. Other top business schools also have established leadership programs.

"The problem for scholars is that as a rigorous science, leadership ain't physics," notes Coy, an associate economics editor of *Business Week*. "For starters, like pornography, it resists definition." Leaders come in all shapes and sizes—pacifistic or warlike, idealistic or cynical, cerebral or intuitive. Nor is any particular style of leadership guaranteed to work. "Al Dunlap was a big success with his slash-and-burn tactics at Scott Paper," Coy observes, "but flopped when he tried the same thing at Sunbeam."

Randall S. Peterson, of Cornell University's Johnson Graduate School of Management, cites research showing that the CEO's personality seems to explain less than one-tenth of the variation in a company's performance. However, the boss may have a considerable *indirect* impact. In a paper last year, Peterson and two co-authors examined Coca-Cola, IBM, and seven other big companies that had done well under certain CEOs and poorly under others. They concluded that the CEO's personality affects the "group dynamics" of top management, which in turn affects profits.

That seems something that future CEOs should know, but, like most theoretical findings in this field, it obviously leaves a great many questions about leadership unanswered; for example, what is it about a CEO's personality that matters, and how do you teach it?

Given this void, many business schools are concentrating their "leadership" efforts not

Can this be taught?

on academic inquiry but on skills training. Students themselves often say they learned more about leadership from being in a crisis of some sort than from any academic course. Picking up that cue, business schools simulate situations that demand leadership and invite students to rise to the occasion. Just like in the real world.

Government's Invisible Hand

"The Strength of a Weak State: The Rights Revolution and the Rise of Human Resources Management Divisions" by Frank Dobbin and John R. Sutton, in *American Journal of Sociology* (Sept. 1998), 5835 S. Kimbark, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

In the early 1970s Washington launched an "employment rights" revolution, with landmark legislation and regulation in the realms of equal employment opportunity, occupational health and safety, and fringe benefits. Many large employers established specialized offices to cope with their new obligations. Then, a curious shift in rationale for these offices took place. Sociologists Dobbin and Sutton, of Princeton University and the University of California, Santa Barbara, respectively, explain.

Employers were not legally forced to establish new personnel offices or other specialized units. But the new laws did create abstract rights and proscribe various abuses without specifying how employers were to comply. Precisely because of that uncertainty, Dobbin and Sutton argue, employers hired "expert" staffs and created new offices as the best protection against costly lawsuits.

In the mid-1960s, about 35 percent of the 279 organizations the authors examined (including publicly traded businesses, nonprofit groups, and government agencies in three states) had personnel or human resources management offices. By the mid-1980s, 70 percent did. (By then, 35 percent also had benefits offices, more than 30 percent had health and safety offices, and 40 percent had equal employment units.)

By the early 1980s, however, personnel managers were singing a new tune about their function. In keeping with an emerging human resources management movement, they were justifying their offices not as defenses against lawsuits but as vehicles for enhancing organizational productivity.

"The new human resources management movement," the authors point out, "was championing diversity as the key to expanding markets and improving innovation, safety and health programs as the key to winning employee commitment and renovating antiquated technologies, and benefits programs as a means to reducing alienation and improving worker attitudes." So compelling was this rationale, say Dobbin and Sutton, that even when the Reagan administration cut back enforcement of employment rights, employers kept creating more such specialized offices anyway (while, in some cases, circumventing the law on the rights themselves).

Changing the rationale was a typically American response, the authors say. In a culture so hostile to government regulation, employers soon come to pretend that they really are only responding to the demands of the market. The authors think the government would do a better job if Americans overcame their "collective amnesia."

SOCIETY

Railing against the Car

"Transitory Dreams: How New Rail Lines Often Hurt Transit Systems" by Jonathan E. D. Richmond, in *The Taubman Center Report* (1998), Taubman Center for State and Local Government, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard Univ., 79 John F. Kennedy St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138; "Dense Thinkers" by Randal O'Toole, in *Reason* (Jan. 1999), 3415 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Ste. 400, Los Angeles, Calif. 90034–6064.

More than a decade ago, Portland, Oregon, often cited as a model of city planning, built a light-rail system connecting downtown and the suburbs, hoping to cut automobile congestion and air pollution. In Portland, as in other cities that followed its example, it hasn't worked out