First Among Equals: T-R-E-A-T Leadership For L-E-A-P in a Knowledge-Based World

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First Among Equals is an excellent book, providing insights on a research-based innovative framework on leadership in the context of the knowledge-based world. The book is well written and presents relevant arguments beneficial to both academicians and industry practitioners associated with knowledge-based work. Every chapter of the book begins with case studies, where the author discusses organizations and individual leaders well known for (a) demonstrating effective leadership through difficult times and (b) developing a positive work environment. The task-orientation, relation-orientation, empowering, authenticity and team-building (T-R-E-A-T) model is based on theoretical arguments and is empirically supported as well. The model covers all the critical aspects of leadership behaviours, including task orientation, relationship orientation, empowering, authenticity and team building. The knowledge-based industries are continuously living in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Therefore, leadership behaviours discussed in the book are absolutely essential for advancing innovation, a crucial driver of performance in organizations.

The book begins with the ‘Preface’ section in which the author shares his background, past experiences, and the motivation to conduct the leadership studies and eventually write this book. This section helps in developing a personal connect with many readers, who might have gone through similar experiences while working in knowledge-based organizations. It is rightly emphasized that the future belongs to the knowledge-based individual who can unlearn and relearn new things. In addition to focusing on the key leadership behaviours (the T-R-E-A-T framework), the author also investigates the impact of these behaviours through three extremely significant mechanisms—fairness at work, positive psychological capacity (such as hope, self-confidence and resilience) and autonomous motivation.
The first chapter introduces the ‘knowledge-based world’ as the author explains the importance of knowledge in today’s environment. Continuous technological advancements, changing nature of jobs and changing workforce are highlighted as three critical aspects that today’s leaders need to appreciate as they attempt to create world-class organizations. The discussion on InMobi and the differences between knowledge-based work and traditional work is important and lays the foundation for the remaining chapters of the book. Leadership is also introduced as a ‘process of influencing an individual or group of individuals to achieve a common goal’ (Northouse, 2010). Some thought-provoking arguments on leadership are presented in this section. It is argued that today’s knowledge-based workers have distinct goal orientations, values, need structures and behavioural patterns. Thus, leaders of today’s organizations face much harder challenges than leaders of traditional organizations. The last section of this chapter covers the research journey taken by the author through an exploratory phase 1 and the quantitative analysis of the T-R-E-A-T framework in phase 2.

The second chapter presents a comprehensive discussion on leadership within knowledge-based organizations. The story of the Satellite Launch Vehicle-3’s (SLV-3) launch and the leadership lessons from Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and Professor Satish Dhawan are powerful, and the readers are unlikely to forget the learnings from this section. ‘Take responsibility for the failures, and in successful times, let the subordinates accept the appreciation’ is one such lesson that all leaders of today’s world may want to comprehend. The detailed list of specific behaviours within the T-R-E-A-T framework is covered in this chapter, helping the reader grasp the differences between the five dimensions in the model. The quotes from discussions between the scientists are also presented for each of the leadership behaviours. In these quotes, it can be noticed that the scientists are talking about the different types of behaviours that form the five dimensions, for example, scientists are talking about delegation and consulting, which are the two types of behaviours within the ‘Empowering’ dimension in the T-R-E-A-T framework. The author introduces the L-E-A-P quadrilateral, arguing that learning, enjoyment, autonomy and performance are the key components of work that can motivate the knowledge workers. A central argument in this book is that the five leadership behaviours (T-R-E-A-T) positively impact the L-E-A-P aspects of the knowledge worker’s job.

In the third chapter, the author describes how the T-R-E-A-T set of behaviours promote fairness at the workplace, which in turn has a positive impact on the knowledge worker’s performance. The chapter begins with a real-life story involving J. R. D. Tata and Sudha Murthy, emphasizing the importance of organizational justice. Leaders can create fair workplaces giving employees a voice and acting on their appropriate suggestions because justice is always in the eyes of the beholder. Through quotes, the chapter discusses the importance of the three dimensions of justice—distributive, procedural and interactional fairness. It is argued that T-R-E-A-T behaviours would facilitate fairness at work, which would enhance knowledge workers’ creative performance behaviours. This model is empirically tested, and the results support fairness perceptions as the mediating mechanism in the leadership behaviours—creative performance relationship.

The next chapter presents yet another highly relevant mechanism—positive psychological capital—through which the T-R-E-A-T model of behaviours can affect employees’ performance. The stories of A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, Indra Nooyi, M. S. Dhoni, Jack Ma and Nelson Mandela, are extremely inspiring and illustrate the significance of developing positive capacities, such as optimism, self-efficacy and resilience. Notably, the quotes on psychological capital further emphasize that leadership in the knowledge-based world must focus on developing such capacities within their subordinates. It is hypothesized that psychological capital is another mechanism through which T-R-E-A-T leadership behaviours can promote creative performance behaviours. Findings support the proposed relationships and show that positive psychological capacities have a strong impact on knowledge workers’ creativity.

The fifth chapter discusses the third and final mechanism—autonomous motivation—through which leadership behaviours impact performance. The story of the senior scientist (SLV-3) exemplifies the need of staying motivated despite facing hardships. Leaders in such knowledge-based organizations must be able to find the right ways of motivating the employees. The author argues that autonomous motivation is a combination of (a) integrated regulation of extrinsic motivation (assimilating the value of work to one’s sense of being) and (b) internal regulation of intrinsic motivation. It is demonstrated that leaders can play an essential role in creating autonomous motivation, which eventually promotes employee performance.
In the sixth chapter, the author discusses how leaders can create a better future for organizations by building the right culture. The examples of changes initiated by Satya Nadella (CEO, Microsoft) help readers understand the different ways through which the leaders can create positive work environments. In today’s world, technological advancements are shaping industries continuously, the knowledge workers demand greater levels of fairness, and the changing demographics further add to the complexity. The onus is on the leaders of knowledge-based industries to become a driving force that can create great places to work by building and maintaining the right work cultures.

The title of the book—First Among Equals—is ideal for discussing leadership in the knowledge-based world. When knowledge rules, then the leader really is the first among the many equals. The leader must make constant efforts to unlearn and learn the latest advancements, and thereby, lead by example. Leaders who can provide opportunities for growth and development to their subordinates are more likely to retain their employees.

The book provides a parsimonious framework in the T-R-E-A-T model of leadership even as the author clarifies towards the end that contextual factors would continue to play a significant role, that is, depending on the situation, the leader should be able to exhibit the right combination of these five behaviours. For instance, a trade-off between task orientation and empowering behaviours might be made depending on the contextual requirements and/or the type of employees. Through the L-E-A-P model, the author rightly points out that learning, enjoyment and autonomy are fundamental needs of the knowledge workers. These needs and expectations must be satisfactorily met to attain high levels of task performance as well as creative performance.

One of the strengths of this book is that the causal framework, including the T-R-E-A-T model, is developed based on a combination of in-depth interviews and a comprehensive literature review. The choice of creative performance is also appropriate given the context of the knowledge-based work. The author rightly emphasizes that the leadership process should be kept as simple as possible because then, more can be achieved by the leaders and his/her teams. The second strength of this book is that the reader gets a detailed insight into the research methodology used to empirically validate the T-R-E-A-T model, and then, test the proposed relationships between leadership behaviours, mechanisms and creative performance.

Thus, the book becomes valuable to both managers and researchers interested in working on leadership and knowledge-based industries.

Another strength of this book is the usage of illustrative quotes from the interviews with scientists to elaborate upon the key points made in various chapters. The reader’s understanding is improved significantly when the scientists describe their observations and opinions on different leadership behaviours. As mentioned earlier, the author has chosen very relevant mechanisms—fairness perceptions, psychological capital and autonomous motivation—to demonstrate how the T-R-E-A-T leadership behaviours can have a positive impact on knowledge workers’ performance. Due to the pandemic, more and more people are now concerned about their mental health and well-being. Leaders can make a huge impact on their employees by promoting healthy work practices, thereby improving the positive psychological capacities of the employees.

The book is also structured to enable the reader to comprehend the explicit and implicit connections between the six chapters. Knowledge-based work is introduced and the next chapter explains the T-R-E-A-T leadership behaviours relevant to the knowledge-based world. Third, fourth and fifth chapters form the core of the book, wherein the three mechanisms are proposed and empirically tested. The last chapter summarises the key arguments and findings from the author’s research.

The book succeeds in explaining the T-R-E-A-T framework of leadership behaviours efficiently, and thus, it has the potential to make a significant impact on the leadership practices existing in the knowledge-based world. The author has given many tools and suggestions (with relevant examples from organizations and leaders) that can help the reader understand and appreciate leadership from a simple and effective perspective. The book will be useful for managers to enhance their leadership effectiveness as they strive hard to excel in the knowledge-based world.

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