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Reflections on Reading

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

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Complex social behavior such as leadership can be taught by calling attention to more experienced leaders in action.

HOWARD PRINCE

When you enter the word “leadership” into the Google search engine, you get 285 million hits, which is one indication of the volume of material available on the complex issue of how individuals motivate and direct the behavior of others. No single theory of leadership development is universally accepted. Opinions range from that of writers who claim that leadership is an inherent trait that exists in some people since birth (and cannot be taught) to the view of Professor Howard Prince, whose quote above expresses his belief that studying the actions of experienced leaders can improve the skills of those desiring to be more successful in leading others. The Navy Professional Reading Program (NPRP) subscribes to the notion that exposure to the experiences of notable leaders can be instructive, and the ten books in the “Leadership” category provide a good starting point for study. Here are some examples.

Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times, by Donald T. Phillips, is a quick read by a best-selling author who is a great storyteller. He uses the life of one of the nation’s most effective presidents to illustrate how good leaders succeed in the most demanding of times and situations. Chapters on getting to know your people, setting clear goals, leading by example, and skillfully communicating are as relevant in the twenty-first century as they would have been to Lincoln in the mid-1800s. Notre Dame football coaching legend Lou Holtz has written, “For anyone whose job is motivating and inspiring others, this book is indispensable.”

Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer, by Margot Morrell and Stephanie Capparell, tells the story of British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, who used unparalleled leadership skills to save the lives of

twenty-seven men stranded with him in the Antarctic for almost two years. After his sailing ship *Endurance* was frozen into an ice pack and ultimately crushed and sunk, he kept his crew alive in almost unbelievable conditions. While the book reads at times like an adventure novel, the two veteran business writers skillfully translate Shackleton's leadership genius into lessons specifically applicable to today's military professionals. Some of the chapter titles—like “Creating a Spirit of Camaraderie,” “Getting the Best from Each Individual,” and “Leading Effectively in a Crisis”—provide a hint of the breadth of topics contained in this widely praised book.

Leadership: The Warrior's Art, edited by Christopher Kolenda, is a remarkable collection of nineteen essays written by scholars, military leaders, and business executives. The book is divided into three sections: “Ancient and Modern Concepts of Leadership,” “Historical Case Studies,” and “Contemporary Experiences and Reflections on Leadership.” The anthology covers leadership from the classical to the modern, from Alexander the Great to the Gulf wars. While many of the essays have an “Army-centric” viewpoint, careful reading discloses the applicability of many concepts to Navy scenarios and to the business world. Noted author Wess Roberts calls this book “a robust collection of thought-provoking essays written by an extraordinary group of accomplished thinkers and leaders.” The chapter “Unleashing Human Potential” is particularly enlightening.

The Good Shepherd, by C. S. Forester, is the story, originally published in 1955, of a U.S. Navy officer commanding a small group of destroyers on escort duty in the North Atlantic during the early days of the Second World War. Forester, best known for his Horatio Hornblower novels, does a marvelous job in describing the human side of the commander, forced to make life-and-death decisions on the basis of limited and flawed data. The book's protagonist is not superhuman; he is in many ways a flawed individual, with many self-doubts. As such, he is not unlike many of the men and women who serve in uniform today. Though set more than a half-century ago, the challenges faced by the men of USS *Keeling* are similar to those of mariners of today. The angry sea, bone-chilling cold, and the loneliness of command have changed little across the decades. While readers cannot actually serve under Commander Krause, they can observe and learn from the successes and failures of this poetic hero.

The other six books in the leadership category also allow readers to observe vicariously leaders in action, and they illuminate traits and characteristics that may help readers shape their own leadership styles. Reading about great leaders is obviously less effective than seeing them in action, but it does at least provide a window into the minds of leaders like Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln.

The ten leadership books in the primary NPRP library and the two dozen titles on the Supplemental Reading list on the program website at www.navyreading.navy.mil are great places to continue your leadership-development process. Remember, the motto of the Navy Professional Reading Program is: “Making Leaders . . . One Book at a Time.”

JOHN E. JACKSON