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Book Review- The Mind of the Leader

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The Mind of the Leader (Book Review)

Hougaard, R. & Carter, J. (2018). *The Mind of the Leader: How to Lead Yourself, Your People, And Your Organization for Extraordinary Results*. Harvard Business Review Press. 224pp. ISBN 9781633693425. \$25.20 suggested retail price.

Rebecca Cofer (Georgia Southern University)

There are is abundance of books touting the secret to effective leadership, whether through specific trainings, online tools, or techniques guaranteed to produce a more aware and involved leader. Hougaard and Carter (2018) are the authors of one such leadership book, but what sets their book apart from the many others is the human element that remains the focus of their text. Ramus Hougaard is the founder and managing director of Potential Project, a global company providing mindful leadership training to employees from all backgrounds. Co-author Jacqueline Carter also works with Potential Project but serves as the North American Director for the company. Hougaard and Carter have each trained leaders in companies like Google, Cisco, and Microsoft and have a total of 40 years of experience in leadership training.

Broken into the three parts described in its expanded title, *The Mind of the Leader* discusses the human foundations to the leadership equation as it relates to the leader, their team, and the organization. Within the three parts of the book are recurring sections, each applied to the specific context of that part. These sections within the parts are titled: 1) Understand Your People, 2) Mindful Leadership, and 3) Selfless Leadership. Hougaard and Carter (2018) approach the topic of mindful leadership not from a higher education perspective, but from a corporate frame. However, their experience working with companies across the globe proves valuable in the insights offered, although these insights tend to be business-centric. Higher education operates increasingly like a business, so the corporate approach to mindful leadership provided in the

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text should be embraced by Student Affairs professionals. Although the authors' experience comes from the corporate sector, higher education professionals across the field can find truth in the book's assertion that employees are "looking for more meaning, happiness, and connectedness" in their work and life (Hougaard & Carter, 2018, p. 3).

After conducting research about leadership across fields like neuroscience and psychology, Hougaard and Carter (2018) found three mental qualities that are critical to successful leadership: mindfulness (M), selflessness (S), and compassion (C). The authors frame their entire text around the MSC leadership approach, insisting that "only internal drivers ... can engage employees on the deeper level needed for long-term commitment and productivity" (p. 7). The *Mind of the Leader* puts the human at the center of the leadership equation and provides interesting real-life examples along with strategies for applying the elements of MSC leadership. Hougaard and Carter agree with Katz's (1955) skills approach to leadership which asserts that leaders can be developed. Their text encourages the reader that the characteristics that make up a successful leader are traits which can be learned through awareness and practice with the techniques they provide throughout the book.

Perhaps the most important part of the text is one of the early sections titled "The Anatomy

of Mindfulness", which gives the reader the biological details behind neuroplasticity and the brain's ability to learn new concepts. Through this base knowledge, the philosophy of the authors can be later developed in future chapters, as implementation of strategies stresses the flexibility of the human brain. For the novice science reader, this section is simple, yet descriptive in its review of basic cognitive functions. Explanations about the functioning of the brain are brief, but critical in framing the flexibility of the brain and how it relates to developing leadership qualities. Referencing a novice-friendly figure about prefrontal lobe takeover, this section succinctly explains how trainings like the ones sprinkled through each chapter "increases the density of grey cells in our cerebral cortex, the part of the brain that thinks rationally and solves problems" (p. 9). The *Mind of the Leader* centers around the idea that mindfulness is both a practice and state of mind; this reframing of mindfulness allows the leader to understand it as a trait that can be learned. Hougaard and Carter (2018) not only reframe this idea but also provide the anatomical reasons behind why mindfulness is possible.

At times, the book can feel abstract and lofty in its approach to mindful leadership, as the authors have topical sections like "Emotions are Universal" and "Interconnectedness". However, the real value in these sections is the Quick Tips and Reflections

that concludes each chapter. Hougaard and Carter (2018) refer to the appendices and the app available for download to use in conjunction with the book. “Chapter 6: Selfless Leadership” ends with “Training for Selfless Leadership”. The authors ask the reader to “set a timer for five minutes... Now, consider the people who made today possible for you” (p. 141). The chapter ends with tips and reflections, with activities such as having the reader “consider one tangible way you could be of more service to your people” (p. 142). Hougaard and Carter’s book engages its readers in the same way they recognize engagement as key to leadership success.

Another unique characteristic of *The Mind of the Leader* is its consideration of leadership as it relates to self-leadership. Prior to delving into the theories behind leading one’s people and the organization, Hougaard and Carter (2018) discuss the need to stop the routine functions of everyday life and consider one’s own values and definition of happiness. As is the case throughout the remainder of the book, the chapter is sprinkled with in-the-moment exercises to practice the approaches they discuss, such as being silently reflective for one minute. In leadership the book argues, “only the focused survive. And certainly, only the focused excel” (Hougaard & Carter, 2018, p. 48). Focus is the beginning point of any discussion of leadership, the authors argue, and it should be the continued center of the

successful leader’s work. Perhaps the most applicable parts of the text come with the sections on leading your people and leading your organization. These chapters address common leadership topics, such as understanding emotions and unconscious biases, but also offer unique viewpoints on such things as “the dangers of empathy” and wise compassion. Some educational professionals may disagree with the premise of dangerous empathy because this is normally considered a positive attribute, especially for those who work in higher education where so much work involves direct support of students. In contrast to that reality, the text presents the argument that “empathy has some pitfalls that every leader should understand” (p. 109).

The final four chapters of the book, which encompasses Part Three, gets to the crux of what many leaders from various stages want—true guidance on leading their organizations effectively. Beginning from the base of organizational cultures, the chapter opens arguing “Most organizations talk about the importance of people, but few create cultures in which people are truly seen as the core of the company” (Hougaard & Carter, 2001, p. 159). Rather than treat the company’s workers like tools, leaders should inspire their teams to create and innovate through collaboration. This final part of the book provides even more concrete strategies for creating a culture that values people.

Using examples from companies such as Accenture, the authors urge leaders to model distraction-free focus that prioritizes the human first. The leader will finish this part of the text with clear strategies for focus in their organization, such as promoting physical movement, enacting common policies for mindful meetings, and even ways of using healthy food to increase mental performance. Part Three, even more so than the previous parts of the book, uses the knowledge gained in previous chapters and applies them to real-life scenarios leaders face in creating a new people-centered culture.

Overall, Hougaard and Carter's *The Mind of the Leader* proves to be both engaging in its real-life examples and useful in the practices and tips each chapter offers. Based on the authors' research over a decade, the book carries out what it claims when it comes to engagement. Rather than offer unrealistic ideas of how to be a people-centered leader, Hougaard and Carter (2018) reference well-known companies such as Lego and Marriott to examine successful leadership techniques while also pausing chapters to have readers practice their techniques for mindfulness. Each part of the text is a reiteration of the principles guiding the MSC Leadership philosophy, so at times the content can seem redundant between the parts. There are concepts related to self-reflection as a leader that reappear throughout the chapters and

can become somewhat redundant when the reader craves more of the tips provided at the end of each chapter. However, *The Mind of the Leader* is applicable to business and education professionals alike and provides concrete guidance on creating a more people-centered leadership style. Alternatively, the educational leader may desire a theory-based approach to the techniques, which is not something provided in this leadership book.

Outside of the minimal criticisms of its lack of theory and somewhat redundant content, *The Mind of the Leader* can be a valuable tool for the higher education professional of any level. Student Affairs professionals will find Hougaard and Carter's (2018) content on cultivating mindful meetings especially relevant, as meetings in higher education can often lack focus or goals. Their tips about disconnection from technology in meetings and even providing healthy snacks are techniques higher education employees can realistically apply to their work. Although sections of the text can be somewhat lofty and abstract in their contents, it is the everyday tips the authors provide that bring value to the Student Affairs professional. Those who serve as administrators in the profession can also directly apply the concepts in Chapter 8, "Selfless Leadership." Oftentimes, higher education administrators work at such a high level that they forget the perspectives of the employees they supervise. Hougaard and

Carter (2018) emphasize the mentor role of the leader, to serve as “more of a catalyst and less of a manager” (p. 133). As is the case for the other chapters, Chapter 8 concludes with a Quick Tips and Reflections list, which asks the reader to be aware of how they are supporting the growth of their employees; yet another example of the

application the text pushes for throughout its pages. Even though *The Mind of the Leader* was not written from the perspective of the higher education professional, there are multiple chapters and techniques that professionals across the field can utilize in their work to become educational leaders.

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Rebecca Cofer, M.A., is the Programs Manager at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, GA. Previously, she has served as the Coordinator of Campus Tutoring Services and an Academic Counselor at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College and Texas Tech, respectively. In her role at Texas Tech, she worked in a specialized program for students with disabilities. Cofer holds a Master's degree in English Literature from Virginia Tech along with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Virginia Tech in English and History. She is currently finishing her coursework in the doctor of education program in Educational Leadership at Georgia Southern University. Cofer's research centers on the campus learning center, with special attention to the experience of the peer educator within those centers. Rebecca Cofer is passionate about working with marginalized groups. She also serves in various leadership roles across national and regional organizations, such as the College Reading and Learning Association.

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