



# weLEAD Book Review

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## The Taboos of Leadership

*The 10 Secrets No One Will Tell You About Leaders and What They Think*

Jossey-Bass - 2007 (166 pages in hardback)

Author Anthony F. Smith

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The Taboos of Leadership may startle you at first glance because of its blunt content! It is unlike most modern books on leadership because it opens issues and discussions rarely addressed. Instead of examining the air-brushed and sanitized picture of leadership most often presented today, this book looks at the “good, bad and the ugly” of modern leaders including egos, politics, perks, double standards, selfishness and succession. As Smith mentions in the first chapter, “No matter how effectively a leader performs, any gap between idealized expectation and the gritty reality undermines credibility.” Regarding the existence of taboos he continues, “If we do not acknowledge their existence and understand their reality, we are allowing ourselves to be held prisoner to misconceptions, not unlike those who believed the world was flat or that life could never be created in a test tube.”

The Taboos of Leadership is a result of a dramatic *change* in the author’s own thinking over his career as a consultant. Early on... his approach as a consultant was to collect data, perform surveys and then tell the CEO what *they* needed to do differently. However, this provided limited results and “was not reflecting the organizational reality I was experiencing.” After ten years he began to change his approach and became an *executive* advocate. He now believes that if certain taboos are revealed and navigated between leaders and followers, better solutions can be found to organizational problems. He also believes it is important to help employees see the problems they blame on their leaders, from the *leaders* point of view.

The heart and core of The Taboos of Leadership is the examination of 10 taboos that exist in leaders and their organizations. A *taboo* is a prohibition that we put on certain things, people or actions that make them untouchable or unacceptable. Since we often avoid talking about taboos we typically create myths about them to hide their reality. For example, the 8<sup>th</sup> taboo discussed is “*Secret 8: Leaders Need to Demonstrate Work-Life Balance (No Problem; Work Is Their Life)*”.

The Taboos of Leadership is a short easy to read book divided into four parts. Anthony Smith performs a candid and unvarnished exposé on a number of taboos leaders rarely admit and wouldn’t discuss openly with most employees. He encourages dealing with these taboos through open dialogue, discussions and even debate. Taboos can be understood and even busted if they serve no useful purpose or are hurting the organization. In the last chapter, Smith communicates how to gallantly *begin* this dialogue.

If you are willing to confront some uncomfortable realities of modern organizations and leadership you will find this book fascinating and revealing. You may not agree with every point or opinion expressed, but taboos in the workplace *are* reality... and sometimes it takes a personal challenge to make us view things from a different perspective.

***weLEAD Rating – highly recommended***

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