

BOOK REVIEW

Inspiring Others

Leadership Lessons of the White House Fellows: Learn How to Inspire Others, Achieve Greatness, and Find Success in any Organization

Author: Charles P. Garcia
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by Kurt Marko

IN THE BOOK WORLD, the topic of leadership is to business what dieting is to self-help: a perennially popular “evergreen” topic, with an endless supply of experts offering fresh ways of rehashing the same old themes, concepts, and advice. Where previous authors have gleaned leadership wisdom from famous presidents, generals, or business moguls, Charles P. Garcia has chosen the participants of a rather obscure government program as fodder for his distillation of leadership lessons.

In “Leadership Lessons of the White House Fellows,” Garcia, himself a fellow 20 years ago, canvasses alumni from the program to share the experiences that shaped their subsequent careers at some of the highest levels of government and industry. President Johnson founded the highly competitive and selective White House Fellows program in 1964. The author describes the program as a

“Rhodes Scholarship for Public Service.” Like that selective scholarship, “the White House Fellowships are offered to a handful of young Americans from all walks of life, who spend a year working at the highest levels of government, learning the process of leading a nation.”

Summation Of Surveys

The book is a summation of surveys and interviews from hundreds of past fellows from which the author extracts 20 lessons for aspiring leaders. Far from a simple reference guide, much of the book consists of the reminiscences, illustrative anecdotes, and morals from the author’s research trove.

“Leadership Lessons” is a handy summary of timeless principles for those charged with directing, inspiring, or mentoring colleagues.

The first lesson, “there’s more to life than work,” is perhaps the most poignant because it comes from a conversation historian and fellow Doris Kearns Goodwin had with President Johnson after he retired. A melancholy Johnson had asked Goodwin to work with him on his memoirs and, in a reflective moment, advised her to get married, have children, and enjoy family life. She recalls, “He talked about how he should have spent more time with his family, because that’s a different and more worthy kind of posterity than the public one that he had been seeking throughout his entire political career.”

Other lessons, such as “put your people first,” “act with integrity,” and “leaders take risks,” while perhaps cliché, are spiced with the same storytelling. For example, in illustrating the principle that “leaders energize their people,” the author relates the story of one fellow assigned to General David Petraeus, former head of the U.S. forces in Iraq. At one staff meeting, Petraeus asked his reports what they felt was the top leadership priority of the brigade. Most responded with the expected answers of integrity, professional competence, and marksmanship. Eventually someone said physical fitness, the answer Petraeus was looking for. The young fellow was incredulous. “Well, we thought he was kidding, and we couldn’t for the life of us figure out how that could be the No. 1

priority. But we learned later that he was right: Self-discipline and being able to perform under pressure and exist outside our comfort zone would be the key that unlocked our success.”

Timeless Principles

“Leadership Lessons” is a handy summary of timeless principles for those charged with directing, inspiring, or mentoring colleagues, whether in business or government. While the principles aren’t unique and are doubtless found in myriad management texts, the stories behind each are both demonstrative and compelling—narratives that, like a good parable, serve to educate and entertain. As Garcia explains, “Genuine leadership is measured by the individual moral choices one makes every day.”

KEY CONCEPTS

- The White House Fellows program, a highly selective training ground allowing young professionals to work in a one-year internship with Cabinet members and other presidential advisors, has prepared many of its alumni for careers at the highest levels of government or the corporate boardroom.
- “Leadership Lessons” is a set of 20 maxims garnered from surveys and interviews of hundreds of past fellows about the people, events, and lessons from their fellowship that shaped their subsequent careers.
- The lessons, while not unique or original, are comprehensive; each is illustrated with numerous stories, a cast of characters from the history books, and events that made front-page headlines.