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View From the Top: An Inside Look at How People in Power See and Shape the World

Lindsay, D. M., & Hager, M. G. (2014).
Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Reviewed by Kirsten D. TenHaken

Michael Lindsay, in *View From the Top*, makes a contribution to leadership research that is unprecedented. Lindsay's 10 years of research, including in-depth interviews with 550 of the top CEOs and senior officials in the United States, comprise the largest leadership study of its kind which is, in itself, a remarkable achievement. The resulting work provides valuable insights into the characteristics and behaviors of many of the world's elite leaders. However, while Lindsay's explicit messages simply describe the view from the top, his implicit messages ascribe more value to these high-profile leaders than other leaders, therefore communicating that "the top" is a place everyone ought to aspire. In the field of Christian higher education, and especially in a student development context, the difference between these messages muddles a clear understanding of faithful leadership.

The central purpose motivating Lindsay's research and this book is clearly introduced: "It was in pursuit of a desire to know how power and leadership really work and can be used for pursuit of the common good that I undertook this research" (p. xii). Therefore, the narrative that follows provides a window into the lives of leaders who sit atop the world's most powerful organizations. As it progresses, however, Lindsay's explicit statement that *View From the Top* is for "those who aspire to the top" (p. xiii) is somewhat negated through other implicit messages. The descriptive narrative of the lives of elite leaders gradually morphs into a simultaneously prescriptive narrative of the course toward such elite leadership, implying leaders from all audiences must pursue this specific course.

In order to recount the power and leadership of high-profile leaders, Lindsay uses seven chapters to outline the seven principles that distinguish the characteristics and behaviors of these elite leaders from their peers. Consistent to all seven principles is the necessity of leaders having “the ability to maximize opportunity” (p. 132). Among other principles, Lindsay specifically highlights the necessity of networking and connections, the value of adopting a generalist or liberal arts approach to life, and the role of a catalytic experience in the development of a leader. He breathes life back into the results of his research through consistent use of stories that both invite the humanity of the reader and capture the humanity of the leader being exemplified.

To provide context for these stories and principles, in his introduction Lindsay offers a thorough description of an elite subset of leaders, platinum leaders, who possess both exceptional influence and skill at employing such influence. In an attempt to distinguish between these leaders and other leaders, Lindsay defines platinum leaders by “(1) the scale of their organizational influence ... (2) their penchant for maximizing opportunity and catalyzing change; and (3) their talent for garnering trust and goodwill” (p. xiii). As Lindsay outlines the seven principles of leadership, he builds a case for the ways platinum leaders epitomize these three distinctions in all aspects of their leadership.

In the midst of Lindsay’s relentless pursuit toward building a case for the value of platinum leadership, however, there lies the essence of my original critique: Lindsay’s explicit message encouraging readers to learn from platinum leaders becomes an implicitly cumbersome message communicating that platinum leadership is the ideal form, and perhaps the only valuable form, of leadership. The approach Lindsay utilizes even in introducing the idea of platinum leadership places greater inherent value on platinum leaders as opposed to more ordinary leaders, because he defines platinum leadership before he ever provides a general definition of leadership. When he eventually gets around to defining leadership as “the exercise of influence in the service of a shared cause” (p. xiv), the value of a leader who embodies this definition seems minimal.

Furthermore, as Lindsay details the seven principles of high-profile leaders throughout the text, he often concludes the description of the principle—and therefore, concludes the chapter—with at least a sentence that refocuses the reader on platinum leadership. For example, Lindsay concludes the final chapter on leading for good by writing, “Platinum leaders live lives of high risk and high reward, maximizing every opportunity to make the biggest impact” (p. 136). Lindsay employs two more sentences to make his ultimate conclusion here, but the point is null. He cannot redeem the fact that he implied, once again, that platinum leadership is the most impactful, and therefore, the most valuable form of leadership.

In the midst of all the ambiguity regarding Lindsay’s explicitly descriptive narrative and his implicitly prescriptive narrative, I am left wondering how he would respond to the following question: Leadership, for what purpose? In his introduction and conclusion where more space exists for personal narrative, Lindsay demonstrates a deep sense of

appreciation and value for leadership outside of that which is considered to be elite leadership. He writes in the introduction,

I'm now convinced that the most gratifying part of leading a major institution has little to do with achieving organizational goals or redirecting a company culture. Instead, the dividend of power comes from relatively small deeds, the most common example being investing in young people.
(p. xix)

His narrative in the conclusion places similar value on faithful leadership regardless of sphere of influence, but nowhere in the narrative of the seven leadership principles did he feel inclined to communicate this value in order to minimize the negative implicit messages throughout. In this way, *View From the Top* leaves readers perplexed about the purposes for which they lead, if they even stop to consider that question.

In the end, Michael Lindsay ought to be commended for his exceptional contribution to the research literature on high-profile leadership. The insights he offers into the power and influence of the world's most prominent leaders is worthy of the consideration of any person seeking to develop their understanding of leadership, power, and influence. His work may be ambiguous due to the simultaneous descriptive and prescriptive narratives, but the lens through which this book is approached can significantly impact its potential for relevance. For those of us in Christian higher education, we must consider *View From the Top* as descriptive of high-profile leaders but not as prescriptive of an ideal form of leadership or a vision for faithful leadership in higher education. Through this lens, Lindsay's book will be of greatest potential value.

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