
Parables of Leadership

by W. Chan Kim and Renée A. Mauborgne



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Students of management have sought for years to understand why the very same activities lead to renewal in one company and to more-of-the-same performance in another. Almost always, the answer that is given is leadership, the ability to inspire confidence and support among the men and women on whose competence and commitment performance depends. Yet while we intuitively recognize leaders whenever we meet them, it has never been easy to answer the question: What is leadership? The essence of leadership cannot be reduced to a series of personal attributes nor confined to a set of particular roles and activities. It is like the challenge of describing a bowl: we can describe a bowl in terms of the clay from which it is made. But a true picture must include the hollow that is carved into the clay – the unseen space that defines the bowl's shape and capacity.

We have searched for ways to capture the unseen space of leadership. The longer this search went on, the more we found ourselves talking about lessons which one of us first heard as a youth in the temples of Kyung Nam province of Korea. These lessons came from Oriental masters who taught the wisdom of life through parables, and they gave us a fresh understanding of the essence of leadership. They provided us with the inspiration and insights we needed to create parables that could capture the unseen space of leadership.

The parables that follow show the essential qualities of leadership and the acts that define a leader: the ability to hear what is left unspoken, humility, commitment, the value of looking at reality from many vantage points, the ability to create an organization that draws out the unique strengths of every member. These parables provide an occasion for reflecting on the essence of leadership as well as on one's own work and life.

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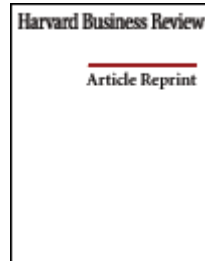
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While it is easy to recognize leadership in action, defining the essence of leadership is hard because it cannot be reduced to a set of personal attributes or particular activities. Intent on capturing the essence of leadership, Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne turned to lessons that Kim had learned as a youth in the temples of Korea's Kyung Nam province. These lessons dealt with the qualities that define true leaders. Their points were made through stories, not through statistics or research. Thus they provided the inspiration for five parables of leadership.

Subjects Covered:

Leadership, Management philosophy, Management styles, Managerial behavior.

