Leading Question

How managers succeed

The Corner Office
by Adam Bryant
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Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

LEADERSHIP IS EASY TO DEFINE. LEADERS determine or clarify the goals of the com-
munities or institutions that they serve; they mobilize individuals and groups to ac-
complish these goals. And most of us be-
lieve we know a leader when we see one.

Understanding what it takes to be an ef-
effective leader, however, is more difficult. In
The Corner Office, Adam Bryant, the de-
puty national editor of The New York Times,
draws on interviews with more than 75
CEOs of businesses, non-profit organiza-
tions and educational and artistic institu-
tions, to identify best practices. These days,
he reports, leaders have abandoned com-
mand-and-control, flattening their organiza-
tions, and inviting direct and frank commu-
ication so they can comprehend issues,
even when they lack technical expertise.

Bryant assumes that his CEOs are “ex-
erts in leadership because they practice it daily.” But, alas, many recycle clichés. They use sports analogies—about teamwork and bench strength. They talk of “simplifying the complex,” “learning through adversity,” and being “comfortable with change.” When you “play in traffic,” one observes, “something happens.”

Happily, when Bryant and his CEOs turn from leading to managing, The Cor-
er Office gets interesting. Successful or-
ganizations, according to Gordon Bethune,
the former CEO of Continental Airlines,
go the most out of employees by setting
measurable goals and articulating strate-
gies for reaching them. When you get fly-
ers “to their destination safely, with their
underwear, reliably, day after day,” he tells
his staff, “you start pulling the better cus-
tomers away from your competitors.”

Successful CEOs, Bryant’s executives agree, learn to listen. They ban BlackBer-
rays and iPhones from meetings, which start and end on time. They drop in on colleagues (and customers), often unannounced. To find out “what’s bubbling under the surface,” they hold office forums, conduct exit inter-
vIEWS when a senior person leaves and in-
sist on quick feedback, instead of waiting for performance reviews or 360s.

And they understand that little things matter. When Nancy McKinstry, CEO of
Wolters Kluwer, decided that her kids
would fly from Holland to the U.S. in
coach rather than first-class (which her expat contract allowed), the folks in accounts payable spread the word that shared sacri-

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