

Jeffrey Pfeffer: Why the Leadership Industry Has Failed

Advice given to leaders is too often based on the ideal world, not reality.

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Today's recipe for being a corporate leader is flawed. | Reuters/Alex Domanski

Corporate training in the U.S. is a \$70 billion market, and 35% of that is spent on management and leadership training. Over the last several decades, the industry has produced a recipe for how to be a successful corporate leader: Be trustworthy and authentic, serve others (particularly those who work for and with you), be modest, and exhibit empathetic understanding and emotional intelligence.

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Why the Leadership Industry Has Failed

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But here's the problem, says Stanford Graduate School of Business professor [Jeffrey Pfeffer](#): None of that is working. Despite the tens of billions of dollars we pour into training-related books, attendance at inspirational speeches, workshops, conferences, and training sessions, the workplace today is as dysfunctional as ever. Organizations are filled with disengaged, dissatisfied employees who don't trust their leaders, and those leaders, in turn, face shortened job tenures, career derailments, and dismissals. Pfeffer confronts this paradox in his new book, *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time*.

"The leadership industry has failed," he says. "There is little evidence that any of these recommendations have had a positive impact." Pfeffer's book points to the ways in which those prescriptions have actually been problematic for leaders and proved themselves to be invalid.

Many of them come from the inspirational leadership success stories we love. As a culture, we're fascinated by the legends — think Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg — but those are just stories, says Pfeffer, and nothing more. People generally want to see and hear only good things about their leaders, so they tend to ignore contradictory evidence and failures. "There's all this mythologizing that besets leadership, as people try to generalize and learn from exceptional cases," he says. "But that has resulted in this enormous disconnect between what actually makes individuals successful and what we think makes them successful."

In *Leadership BS*, Pfeffer argues that one reason the leadership industry has not been successful is that its recommendations are based on an ideal world, rather than on the real world. Among the prescriptions for better leadership, for example, is that leaders need to be truthful, when in reality, the ability to lie can be very useful for getting ahead. Skill at manipulation, writes Pfeffer, "is a foundation of social power." In fact, he says, there is a reciprocal relationship between power and lying: The powerful deceive more often, and the ability to deceive effectively creates social power.

Why Authenticity is Overrated

Being a manager requires playing a role.

One look at the numbers of books and seminars about "authentic" leadership, and it's clear the trait is in vogue at the moment. Yet Stanford GSB professor Jeffrey Pfeffer says the quest for authenticity is overrated and often the opposite of what's needed to make corporate leaders effective. Instead, he says, executives are far better off being "usefully inauthentic."

Pfeffer laments the leadership training industry's call for "authentic" leaders in his new book, *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time*.

"One of the most important leadership skills is the ability to put on a show," writes Pfeffer, "to act like a leader, to act in a way that inspires confidence and garners support — even if the person doing the performance does not actually feel confident or powerful." Some of the world's most successful leaders, he writes, make and remake themselves all the time, adjusting their behaviors to fit the situations they face.

Pfeffer says Stanford even offers a course called "Acting with Power," taught by the social psychologist [Deborah Gruenfeld](#). The class draws on the craft of acting, as well as the teachings of psychology, to help students learn to "play" authoritative roles effectively.

This is an essential skill, says Pfeffer. Most successful corporate leaders have mastered the art of being inauthentic. They are effective regardless of their wants, needs, or belief systems, and can adapt to the environments they confront, he says. "They don't get stuck in their temporarily authentic selves."

– Eilene Zimmerman

The same is true for authenticity, which Pfeffer says is just another leadership development prescription that isn't useful — or, for the most part, even possible. To be authentic means to be in touch with and express one's true feelings, and although that may sound good, he says, in reality it doesn't make sense. "Leaders don't need to be true to themselves; in fact, being authentic is the opposite of what they should do."

It's far more important for leaders to understand what a particular situation requires and to act in an appropriate way, says Pfeffer. "Leaders need to be true to what the situation demands and what the people around them want and need," he says. "Each of us plays a number of different roles in our lives, and people behave and think differently in each of those roles, so demanding authenticity doesn't make sense." In his book, Pfeffer cites sociological research that has shown how the attitudes of employees change depending on their situation at work — whether they are rank-and-file employees or managers, for example, or whether they are members of a union. Research has also shown that a person's personality can be affected and changed by his or her job and workplace conditions.

In the end, says Pfeffer, we would all be better off accepting that our leaders are generally not truthful, authentic, modest, or trustworthy, largely the opposite of the message we get from the popular motivational leadership stories we hear. "All those stories and the inspiration we get from them change nothing," he says. "The fundamental problem with this industry is the disconnect between what we say we want from our leaders and how they actually manage organizations."

Pfeffer says the quality of our leaders in corporate America won't change until we start evaluating them and our leadership development practices with a more clinical eye, using useful, objective metrics, rather than simply handing out questionnaires at the end of leadership development

activities and asking participants if they enjoyed it. “The leadership industry is so obsessively focused on the normative — what should leaders do and how things ought to be — that it has largely ignored asking the fundamental question of what actually is true and why,” Pfeffer writes.

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Without data that permits us to make accurate assessments of leaders, we can’t make meaningful improvements in how they are developed. And until leaders are measured by what they actually have or haven’t accomplished — and are held accountable for improving both their own behavior and workplace conditions — nothing

is likely to change, says Pfeffer. “The leadership industry gives people what they want,” he says. “We want nice stories, so that’s what we get.”

Jeffrey Pfeffer is the Thomas D. Dee II Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. His new book, Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time, was published by Harper Business.

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