



Book review:

## Saturday morning keynote speaker's book on leadership

**Robert Rader**  
Executive Director, CABE

Wouldn't it be great to have a template for finding great leaders when you really need them? How about a screening process you can rely on?

If your school district is going through, say, difficult fiscal times (okay, all times are now fiscally difficult) or have a special upcoming project that must be done with as few errors as possible, wouldn't it help to match candidates up against a guide that could help you make a decision?

Well, unfortunately, the perfect template does not exist. Human beings are too fallible, somewhat unpredictable and situations change so that it is difficult to find the "right" person for all cases.

Finding that one critical leader is always a hard job. While it is one of the most important responsibilities of school boards, finding the "right" match is often difficult.

According to Harvard Business School Assistant Professor Gautam Mukunda, many believe that the difference made by leaders is often indistinguishable from what other people would do under similar circumstances. However, in *Indispensable: When Leaders Really Matter*, he writes that leaders very much make a difference and he provides a loose template for finding the right man or woman for the job.

Professor Mukunda has developed what he calls a Leadership Filtration Process (LFP). He examines, in some detail, the leadership of several historical figures, including Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill, business leaders such as Jamie Dimon (Bank of America) and Al Dunlap (Sunbeam) and a medical researcher named Judah Folkman.

The LFP is based on how the potential candidates for leadership positions have been "filtered". For example, the U.S. military "filters" its potential leaders

by ensuring they go up through the ranks where they are constantly evaluated. This "tight" LFP, similar to what is done in many companies, enables those who have done well to continue to move up, while screening out those who haven't. It generally results in very few individuals with the highly-prized characteristics to move all the way to the top.

On the other hand, looser LFPs results in a much better chance of people moving up – and the people who do are likely to be more dissimilar than each other than you would have in a tighter LFP. There is a much better chance of ending up with an "Extreme", that is an outlier, who is very different than what a tighter LFP would consider an acceptable candidate.

So, how does the LFP work? To a good extent, that will depend on the job. An Extreme might actually be better in some situations, especially those in which real out-of-the-box thinking and action may be appropriate.

But, for the most part, the selection committee or person, will look at the length of a person's career, the frequency of evaluation, whether there is a winner-take-all process, the system's tolerance for failure, the age of the organization and unique advantages of a candidate.

### Examples: Dunlap and Churchill

Al Dunlap graduated from West Point in 1960, ranked 537<sup>th</sup> out of his graduating class of 550. After three years in the Army, he joined Kimberly-Clark and thereafter spent time in a number of other companies, where he appeared to turn them around, including Scott Paper, where he laid off more than "a third of its employees, including 71% of the headquarters staff and half of management." He cut research spending, delayed maintenance for a year and his strategy was aimed at maximizing short-term profitability. Kim-

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berly-Clark then bought the company for three times what it was worth when he came on.

Kimberly-Clark then realized it “had massively overpaid for Scott and would have to reverse many of Dunlap’s changes to turn it into a company that was profitable over the long term”.

Sunbeam, was a “deeply troubled” company and Dunlap was brought in to lead it with little examination of his record and most board members “never even had a chance to meet him before he was hired.” His stay at Sunbeam was a disaster. Stock prices “fell drastically and many of his supposed improvements were the product of questionable accounting.”

So, here, was a basically unfiltered Extreme leader, who destroyed the company he was hired to save.

Now, let’s examine the case of Winston Churchill. Here we have a leader with many, many years of experience both in and out of Parliament and at Cabinet level positions. He had some successes, but, especially in World War I, many large failures. Before he was called on to take the prime minister position in 1940, the “British system had evaluated Churchill and decided that it did not trust him with power”.

Professor Makunda considered him as *having been filtered out of the system*, but his career was “resurrected by the most extraordinary combination of circumstances imaginable”. He was obviously the right man at the right time for England and this highlights

one of the guidelines from the book: *Traits That Prevent Passage Through LFP Can Sometimes Produce Great Successes in Office*.

Churchill was an Extreme, but it was what Britain needed at the beginning of the war. But, as he said, he was given the “Order of the Boot” by British voters as soon as the war was over.

This review cannot go into all details on how the LFP template would work. But, what it illustrates, through the parade of the leaders Professor Mukunda discusses, is the importance of examining how people rise through a system as one way to predict how a candidate will do once he or she gets the position.

So, if you ever need to find a leader, it is absolutely critical that you do a thorough background check and learn as much as you can about a candidate *and the circumstances he or she faced*. This is probably one of the best ways to learn what a potential new leader will perform once given the position.

*Professor Mukunda is the Saturday morning at this year’s CBE/CAPSS Conference on leadership.*