ForeWord Reviews

BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

Making Horses Drink: How to Lead and Succeed in Business

Alex Hiam
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Ask managers about their most important function and they will give some version of "provide leadership." That is, motivate the troops, assess opportunities and challenges, establish priorities, set the tone and direction. Ask managers where most of their effort goes and many will admit to spending inordinate amounts of time putting out small fires. Somehow in the day-to-day conduct of business, a manager's single most important function is lost. Why?

The author identifies an elemental cause: hubris. Managers assume they know best. In the tortured metaphor of his title, Hiam writes that managers assume that their job is to take the horse to water, clinging to the idea that their role is most important, without considering the horse's motivation, wants, or intelligence. In other words, managers prefer to manage rather than lead. Managers want to dictate how the work is done; leaders care that the work is done well.

From this premise, Hiam explores several ways to increase employee production by thinking first about what motivates employees. In ten chapters, he discusses key elements in constructing, maintaining, and harnessing a good team.

The author recommends looking for an obvious attribute when hiring employees: initiative rather than qualification. Hiam writes that too often managers "find people who can do the job well, but don't really know if they will." Better, he says, to hire a "gung-ho" attitude than someone who may no longer be so interested. Then ensure that everyone knows where the company is going, while soliciting ideas about how to get there. Too often, writes Hiam, communication flows one way. He suggests asking employees how they would accomplish a task, rather than telling them how to do it. He also says managers should give criticism honestly, and encourage it in return.

Much of what Hiam suggests is not original; anyone with a bit of time could probably produce similar ideas. However, for most managers time always runs short. Hiam provides a valuable compendium of ready-made ideas for encouraging initiative, creativity, and productivity, of which no company can ever have too much.

Michael Thomas