

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Manuscript 1520

Book Review: Credible: The Power of Expert Leaders

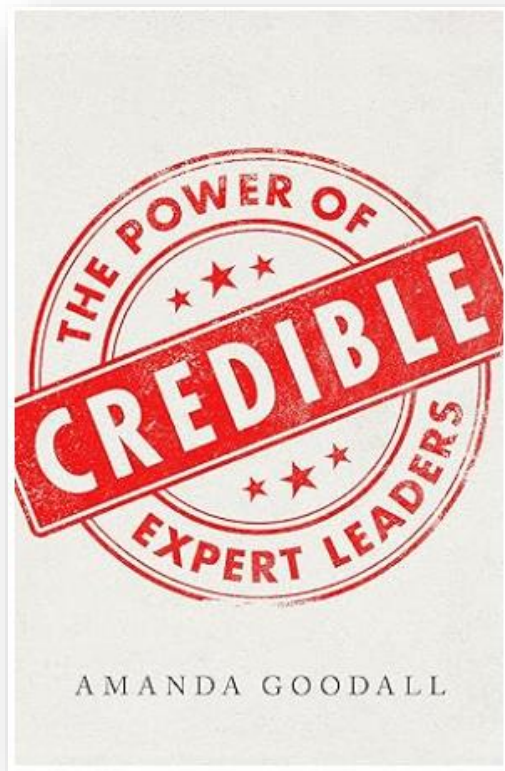
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Credible:

The Power of Expert Leaders

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Publisher: PublicAffairs (July 11, 2023)

Hardcover: 272 pages

ISBN-10: 1541702506

ISBN-13: 978-1541702509

<https://www.amazon.com/Credible-Expert-Leaders-Amanda-Goodall/dp/1541702506>

Motivation

Amanda Goodall's (2023) book, *Credible: The Power of Expert Leaders*, argues why expert leaders are needed more now than ever across all organizational domains. Goodall describes the book as a chronicle of the "natural experiment," showcasing failures of nonexperts

leading various sized groups and organizations, also citing parallel success by expert leaders (p. 1). The book is divided into eight chapters, starting with the introduction and examining the need for experts, the recruitment and development of experts, and finally, the organizational environment to sustain experts. The introduction begins as a corollary to Nichols' (2024) work regarding how society no longer values experts. Goodall shares the same frustrated and almost exasperated tone of Nichols co-creating the notion of the instant expert armed with false confidence that an intelligent generalist can do everything an expert can and more.

There is a certain romance alluded to by the well-known quote with no clear attribution: "Ordinary folks doing extraordinary things." Goodall (2023) and Nichols (2024) both use Heinlein's (1969) feeling about the generalist's ability to excel at everything based on effort. Heinlein was referencing *Starship Troopers* and how the fictional government led by scientists and academics failed and was replaced by one created by ordinary veterans. However, the romantic notions of leadership are halted through Gresham's law (Goodall, 2023; Nichols, 2024). Dutu et al. (2005) explained that Gresham's law was where bad money drove out good money. Imagine that a new local mint decided to use 75% silver instead of the 99% used by the national mint for coins in the Middle Ages. The weaker concentration devalued the worth and arguably power (Dutu et al., 2005). In many cases described by Goodall, the concentration

of expertise by most modern leaders is often zero, driving out the experts for various reasons and resulting in numerous failures.

The Leader Generalist Blindspot

Goodall (2023) discusses many of the reasons organizations arrived at this juncture where the value of an expert has decreased and exchanged for a generalist. Goodall uncovers many paradoxes, for example, “The irony is that while no one respects experts in general, everyone wants to be seen as an expert in their own field” (p. 8) or the pithy rejection of professions such as surgeons, pilots, and nuclear plant operators and their replacement by juxtaposed occupations of crossing guards and thespians. Weick and Sutcliffe (2015) agree with Goodall that success creates a diminishing perception and drives overconfidence. The paradox of success as a competency measurement is the foundation of the blinded organizations and the continual generalization practice (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). The challenge erupts when the uninitiated leader meets unexpected events and is unequipped to make quick and effective decisions (Goodall, 2023; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015).

Goodall (2023) alludes to scientific management or Taylorism, named after Frederick Winslow Taylor, the undisputed father of metric-based management, as one of the significant causes driving the generalization of leadership. In the modern world, Taylorism is the basis of arguably all production and quality systems wherein metrics are paramount. The point is the balance, not the abuse primarily as a mask (Muller, 2019). Goodall stated, referencing consultants, “Reliance on numbers and quantitative manipulation gave the impression of scientific expertise based on ‘hard’ evidence; it also minimized the need for specific, intimate knowledge of the institutions to whom advice was being sold” (p. 9).

The business school has become the origin point of much of the continuance of generalists as leaders (Goodall, 2023). Bennis and O’Toole (2005) describe the problem as a failure that has happened because of the focus on academics and not the competence of the graduates or the faculty’s grasp of essential drivers. They argue that too much focus on financial and economic analysis is a significant issue, as does Goodall (2023). Goodall’s dissenting view is that business schools still produce generalists despite being described as a profession akin to lawyers and dentists described by Bennis and O’Toole. Goodall, Bennis, and O’Toole obscured the need for examination of the famous case method of teaching and research, noting the challenges to delivery and the application across domains (Bridgman et al., 2016).

To that end, the business professional, as described by Bennis and O’Toole (2005), is the cultural catalyst fostered and brought to organizations through cadence-like turnovers of leaders in many corporations. Business professional membership can be thought of by language as a tacit norm defended by a group as a gatekeeping measure, which Goodall (2023) calls jargon. Indeed, cultural fit is determined by identifying values through linguistic conformity (Lu et al., 2024). The point is that subcultures within a larger culture have dialect or lingua franca and are viewed by outsiders as having dubious meanings (de Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2008). The concern is what Nichols (2024) designates as elitism, where the language shifts from just a dialect to jargon, assisting in the hyper-confidence of the generalist at the root of his and Goodall’s arguments. It is not the distaste for jargon but for not being a member as casually as other groups.

Building the Expert Leading Organization

Goodall (2024) offered an understanding of the core domain expertise and experience that an expert leader needs to be credible. She also explains the mechanics of being an expert leader through five required components: (1) the ability to create a clear sense of purpose, (2) taking the long view, (3) the creation of an environment through vision and follower feedback, (4) the setting of the high bar equally lived up to, and (5) becoming the example of quality to all followers. The components become the baseline for recruitment, retention, and evolution of the culture, adding, “It is a cliché to say that organizations are only as good as their people, but the best companies are aware of their reliance on expert talent” (Goodall, 2023, p. 178).

As Goodall (2023) starts discussing the need for diversity, she extends the notion that the same core expertise and experience requirements apply regardless of candidate characteristics such as race, gender, and orientation. However, recruitment strategies must change as some populations have expert potentiates that differ from the normative organizational culture (Goodall, 2023). Goodall alludes to the default condition of any organization being homogeneous, where any change or diversity creates tension, which benefits creativity and long-term organizational fitness (Schein, 2015).

An environment friendly to experts needs vital features, such as a strong belief that being an expert is valuable and freely gained through autonomy and discourse (Goodall, 2023). Goodall (2023) uses the example of *Netflix* and leader *Hastings*, noting the slow removal of controls allows the organization to create an expert environment that attracts like-minded individuals looking for freedom. Organizational culture must permit failure and have the support structure to learn and reassess (Goodall, 2023). The ability to communicate across boundaries and an environment conducive to sharing allows curiosity to grow (Goodall, 2023). Of course, taking an existing culture and working to transform it into an expert-friendly oasis is better suited for an evolutionary movement through subcultures than the mountainous task of corporate culture assassination (Schein, 2015).

In Finality

In complexity science, Arthur (1989) discussed competing technologies and lock-in, describing the sensitivity to initial events and path dependence. The passion of experts being revalued displayed first by Nichols (2024) and then by Goodall (2023) disregards the strength of adaptation to the changing domains specific to continual path dependence. For example, artificial intelligence (AI) and the derivatives of natural language processing and generation add unmeasurable abilities to every user, allowing for even faster access to data and potential misuse (Perkins et al., 2023). Nam (2023) noted the survey results of 1,000 college students, 56% of whom used AI to write their papers, exams, and assignments. However, the matter is that AI is not inherently wrong or unethical; the application and context of use are the debate, but AI further escalates Goodall's (2023) assertions of the nonexperts winning; one may even entertain the idea that the nonexperts have won.

The book was a short and entertaining escapade into an almost shameful bevy of leadership failures, to borrow a German word, *schadenfreude*, loosely translated as my pleasure based on your failure and pain. Unlike other leadership books, Goodall (2023) offered a familiarity of personal expertise in some specific topic or task that goes unnoticed or unwanted creating

frustration among all leaders at some point in their careers, and, if the world was expertly led, then the unnoticed and unwanted expertise in the world may become desirable.

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About the Reviewer



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Dr. Carl Lee Tolbert, an affiliated researcher at the Institute for Globally Distributed Open Research and Education (IGDORE), is a well-known expert in AC drive performance and reliability, in addition to being an independent published research scholar. He spends his research time split between engineering development of new technology in areas such as cutting-edge Industry 4.0 sensors and the application of artificial intelligence in industrial automation systems. Dr. Tolbert's other main research interest is organizational leadership, specific to phenomenological inquiry and the application of real-time ethnography through social media. He has been a guest speaker at numerous universities, industrial conferences, and major manufacturing corporations. If not writing or traveling, he can be found spending time with his wife, Jill, at their home in Sioux Falls, enjoying the simple life of cooking and exploring the great outdoors.

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