

# Alpha Leadership

A new book by Robert Dilts

by Surinder Deol

A new book by Robert Dilts is an occasion for celebration. Starting when he was barely 21, he has enriched the field of human learning and change through his creative genius. His new book *Alpha Leadership*, co-authored with two other gifted individuals from Britain, is a new kind of a business book that combines the best of NLP techniques with several ready-to-cook business recipes. It makes for a gourmet meal that is unique in many ways. Anne Deering, the first of the two coauthors who is an A.T. Kearney vice president, brings with her an incredible amount of business expertise that is visible almost everywhere. Julian Russell, the second coauthor who is a former NLP trainer and an executive coach at present, has probably contributed several insights on learning processes within business organizations. And, of course, the contribution of Robert is seen in reframing of several of his favorite techniques for a purely business audience for whom acronyms like NLP are part of professional jargon that should be avoided at all costs.

The field of management literature is over-flooded with books on leadership. Therefore, any new book with "leadership" as part of the title is more likely to be received with considerable skepticism. The reason for

such reaction is understandable. Most of these books contain a mixture of rules, principles or laws that deceptively sound like the laws of science without much grounded validation. The worst kind of leadership books are those that read like clippings from business magazines and business sections of daily newspapers. I am happy that Robert and his coauthors have avoided these roads that have been much traveled without success.

*Alpha Leadership* is a book that is hard to characterize one way or the other. At one level, it is a book of stories—stories that you will remember possibly for a lifetime. In particular the story about Itzhak Perlman's violin performance with one broken string is deeply moving and it reverberates through the entire text like background music. And who can ever forget his words at the end of the performance: "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music he can still make with what he has left." Leadership is indeed the art of *making music* with whatever you are left!

Another story that is equally gripping though graphically unpleasant is about the leprosy patients whose fingers are eaten by rodents at night without their knowing it because their own sensory mechanisms have

failed them. It makes a powerful argument that large organizations often have dead body parts that add no value and are outside the visible range of business leadership. The authors rightly recommend "skin-driven management" as a way of managing resources and managing change.

This book can also be described as a very practical book with lots of tools and easy to practice tips that can contribute substantially to a leader's ability to learn and change. Some of these tools would be familiar to any NLP practitioner—six logical levels, four perceptual positions, chunking up and chunking down, positive intention, Disney's dreamer, realist and critic states, and metaprograms. But the authors present these concepts with a strong business twist—something for which every business trainer has yearned for years. Some of the non-NLP exercises like graphic equalizer, the leverage point, catalytic mechanisms, and 80:20 leadership should work as effectively as their NLP counterparts, especially in training situations.

No business book can have a lasting impact without a model that is simple and appealing. This is where, I think, the book excels and raises the level of discourse. The model, which

is a three-point loop, with labels such as Anticipate, Align and Act seems intriguing at first but on further reflection drills deeper into the reader's consciousness. We could not have found a better way to summarize the challenge of running a business enterprise. The nine principles surrounding these three big umbrella items seem less intuitive and more contrived, but this is a minor weakness compared with the symphonic rhythm with which the model unfolds and holds the reader's imagination.

Above everything else, the sheer beauty of some of the statements struck me. Some of the observations and quotations that show up in the text like stray pearls on a beach—you read them and you are just mesmerized. For example, "one person should not give orders to another person ... both should agree to take their orders from the situation." (Mary Parker Follet) The one about shutting the white noise, "In most organizations the inside noise is so loud and so incessant that the whisperings and rustlings outside that indicate opportunities and threats are often inaudible." On organizational alignment: "Aligned organizations learn, and behind every learning organization lie teacher-leaders. Teaching leads to empowerment, and when the leader teaches—when teacher becomes one of the roles the leader embodies—a wavefront of empowerment can cascade down through the organization, and supercharge its capabilities." On time: "To lead effectively in a business world in which you have to act before you know exactly where you are going, or how you will get there, you have to be both *through* time and *in* time, at the same

time." On a leader's legacy: "There is a paradox at the heart of the idea of business leadership, which is that the leader must add value to the organization, but must not take away when he or she leaves. An essential part of a leader's job is to make himself or herself dispensable through creating a *culture of leadership*, which extends throughout the organization."

Can we put on Disney's critical hat to say something negative about the book? Surely, we can but it would need a great effort to find a major flaw. There are couple of things that came to my mind but those are differences of emphasis rather than a major point that the authors missed. For instance, it is my feeling that the book does not clearly state that self-leadership precedes the act of leading others. The point regarding personal vision and values is covered as part of the logical levels, but I wish the authors had gone deeper into self-awareness aspects and had recognized them as the first steps toward effective leadership. They seem to ride a different train: "One of the key themes of this book is that leadership is not really about individuals at all, but about the relationship between leaders and led." (p. 56)

Experience shows that leadership starts with self, blooms in its relationship with others, and it reaches its summit when it returns to the very self that ignited the initial flame in the form of higher creativity and a new vision for humanity. Any other vision of leadership tells only half the story. The good news is that the authors have done a pretty good job of demonstrating this very vision of leadership despite the above "summary"

statement that is somewhat unclear or misleading!

*Alpha Leadership* will be remembered as a book that changed the discourse about leadership. The authors have done a marvelous job of building a pyramid of ideas through the medium of stories and metaphors, tools and reflections that would appeal to the novice as well as the expert. It also enriches the field of NLP by reaching out to people who will not sign up for an NLP course but can now benefit from its myriad insights.

**Alpha Leadership:**

**Tools for business leaders who want more from life**

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[<http://www.wily.com>]

**Website:** [www.AlphaLeaders.com](http://www.AlphaLeaders.com)



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