

READING LIST

Prima cut

Leading Professionals: Power, Politics and Prima Donnas – by Professor Laura Empson – reminds Emma Dowden, COO at independent UK firm Burges Salmon, that you learn as you go with leadership, and she’s keen to uncover some secret influencers



Power, Politics and Prima Donnas – it quickly becomes apparent that Laura Empson’s latest publication is about the complexity, confusion and challenge of leading within professional organisations.

I found it a fascinating read. This is not another ‘how to lead’ book – nor, as she herself proclaims, is it a book that seeks to give you the answers. You will need to look elsewhere for that. However, Empson says she wants the reader to “see familiar phenomena with greater clarity.”

Much resonates. The quotation at the start of chapter two – “I thought once I was elected chairman I would finally have access to the levers of power. But when I moved into my new office I realised there was nothing there – just a desk” – encapsulates, for me, a lot of what is misunderstood about management and leadership within professional firms. As those who undertake such a leadership role will know, there is no manual or rulebook telling you how to lead and operate successfully within the complex, relational and multi-layered environments of such an organisation. In my experience, leadership is self-navigated, and success is built from gaining credibility, influence and a proven track record. Then on top of this, you must have regard for, and operate effectively within, the dynamics of your own business. At all times leaders have to balance what Empson describes as the “paradoxes of leading professionals” – for example, autonomy and control.

The reason I found the book

compelling is that it articulates and pulls together a lot of unspoken and hidden dynamics that can be observed within law firm partnerships. It comes across as credible, apparent from the in-depth research. It’s rich in illuminating extracts from the more than 500 leader interviews conducted.

Specifically, the book introduces the concepts of ‘leadership constellation’ and ‘plural leadership’, encouraging you to look behind an organisation’s published governance organogram to what really happens. Who are the influencers? Who has power without control? Furthermore, it doesn’t shy away from the often ignored and delicate issues, such as potentially uncomfortable reading about the traits of “insecure overachievers” – a type, Empson says, attracted to highly successful professional organisations. She sets out the impact of such dynamics on individuals themselves and their organisations, and expresses a need for organisations to actively manage them.

I hope there will be a follow-up. It would be of value to see Empson analyse her research to guide professional organisations on some of the trickier issues they’re facing, such as gender diversity, which she references, acknowledging the vast majority of leaders interviewed were male.

The book has left me motivated to go and map my firm’s leadership constellation. But one of the book’s themes is the need for management to lead discreetly ... I’d better do it quietly! ▀

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