

Book review

Leading Professionals: Power, Politics and Prima Donnas by Laura Empson

Reviewed by Professor Stephen Mayson

This is a fascinating book. It delves into some of the darker recesses of professional service firms and systematically unpicks many of the organisational and psychological dynamics that pass for leadership in them. Professor Laura Empson has a longstanding interest in professional firms and, consequently, a real appreciation of what makes them tick.

The aim of the book is “to help readers (practitioners and academics alike) to ask better questions, to see familiar phenomena with greater clarity, and to think more rigorously about how to discover the answers for themselves”. Judged on that aim, the book should be a success – though, as ever with practitioners, I might wonder about their stamina and willingness to stick with the necessary rigour to think through the issues and come to the best conclusions.

The book is divided into four sections: the foundations of leadership; leadership and individuals; leadership and organisations; and conclusions. Its methodology is built on a series of in-depth research studies conducted by Professor Empson over many years, including formal interviews with more than 500 professionals in 16 countries (though the preponderance lies with accounting, law and consulting firms in the United Kingdom and the United States). Each substantive chapter in the book relates to aspects of these research studies, and is therefore enriched with detailed quotations from various interviewees that add ‘voice’ and authenticity to the content.

Many of the concepts and foundations of leadership might seem familiar to readers who have looked into this aspect of organisational life before – that leadership is situational, contingent and contested will not be news to all. However, the author introduces us to some new thoughts about a ‘leadership constellation’ and ‘plural leadership’, which emphasises leadership not as something that people do but as something that happens. It happens

because of interaction among members of the firm (and not just those who have some badge of ‘leader’), where each seeks to influence another, where leadership roles are shared, and where authority is ambiguous. It can all look a bit messy – from both the outside and the inside – but, claims the author, “there is a logic to how leadership happens in professional organizations, even if that logic is not necessarily apparent to the professionals themselves”.

The quest to understand and analyse that logic is what this book is about. It explores the nature of power and politics in professional firms – where power is rarely given or claimed explicitly, and where overt politicking is frowned on. Where the ‘followers’ are often insecure over-achievers, driven to maintain their individual autonomy and yet desperate for any sign from those they respect that they are doing well. It prompts the thought that perhaps the supreme achievement of any professional services firm and its leadership is that, while professionals believe themselves to be autonomous, they are nevertheless conforming to what the firm has socialised them to do, think and believe. Surely this outcome cannot be achieved without a high degree of power and politics?

Indeed not. Professor Empson’s articulation and explanation of the concepts and dynamics of leadership provides a wealth of analytical tools for understanding the often subtle and sophisticated use of influence, as well as the keys to practising (and appreciating) non-political politicking. She demonstrates convincingly the need to recognise and balance the ever-present tensions between individual and collective interests, commercial and professional priorities, autonomy and control, harmony and conflict. Her conclusion about these paradoxes of leadership is that leaders need to construct a ‘dynamic equilibrium’ in which the appearance of a steady state for the firm is held in balance despite constant flux and the need for continuous adaptation to these inherent tensions within it. I wonder whether, for all

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the insight and help that Professor Empson offers to leaders in this book, she makes it any more attractive to those considering stepping up to the plate!

As a minor quibble, I felt that chapter 9 on leading mergers might have been a missed opportunity. The chapter acknowledges that mergers are “the extreme change challenge” for leaders in professional firms. Rather than framing the chapter around mergers, perhaps the book’s concepts and their application – as well as the generalisability of its messages – could have been better served and reinforced by making this chapter about managing change, with some illustrations drawn from the extreme case of merger but alongside others of a more prosaic and day-to-day nature.

More fundamentally, while convincing on the development and use of her conceptual frameworks, I confess that the author leaves me with some broader questions. Professor Empson presents a case for, first, professional firms not being like other business organisations and, second, for the generalisability of her approach to all professional firms. The substance of both cases seems to rest on the idea of partnership. Much of what she describes is said to owe its efficacy and success to social embeddedness, and she identifies four characteristics of partnership that lead to this: career-long tenure; close personal relationships; shared values; and mutual trust.

On one hand, I do not see that these characteristics are necessarily confined – either individually or in the aggregate – to professional partnerships. It therefore does not convince me on the issue of whether professional firms are really all that different when it comes to leadership. For those who consider the nature and practice of leadership in organisations generally, I believe that there is much to be gained (and, I think, recognised) from the analysis in this book.

On the other hand, I also do not see these characteristics being maintained within professional partnerships – generational differences and expectations, changing promotion, retention and reward structures, and increasing geographical and social diversity are eroding all four of them.

Further, the statement on page 22 of the book that “partnership is the prevailing form of governance

within established professions such as law and accounting” is no longer supported by the structural statistics of the professions, which show a significant shift towards full incorporation. Admittedly, chapter 4 provides a robust defence of “the partnership ethos” as an alternative to the partnership form, and such an ethos can certainly exist irrespective of legal structure. But, for example, the idea (on page 64) that the “protracted system of promotion to partner is designed to ensure that an individual’s professionalism can be trusted by clients and partners alike” becomes a relic of a bygone age when the modern perception of associates is that the protracted system is now intended to maintain a narrower ownership base and higher levels of profits per equity partner for as long as possible. So too is the moderating influence of unlimited personal liability, when figure 4.1 shows what a tiny percentage of accounting, law and consulting firms have maintained any structure that carries unlimited liability.

It is probably the case that partnership structure and governance still holds more true for the large law firms that provided the base for much of Professor Empson’s research. The nature of these firms is highlighted in the statement (on page 62) that their key income-generating assets are technical knowledge, client relationships, and reputation. However, when one looks beyond these ‘elite’ firms (or even, in some cases, within them), these ‘key’ assets are each being supplemented or replaced by processes and technology, contracted work-flows, and brand. These all represent a shift from the individual to the organisational, and then pose intriguing consequences and challenges for autonomy, control, power, security, performance assessment, and commercial priorities – all aspects of the leadership paradox set out in this book. It would have been fascinating to read the author’s assessment of how such shifts affect her analysis of leadership dynamics now and into the future.

It seems to me that, increasingly, firms are not only abandoning partnership as a legal form, but also at best are paying only lip-service to partnership culture and ethos in their structural and governance arrangements. Very few professional firms are either large or true partnerships, and the nature of their

professional assets and structures exhibits much greater heterogeneity than the strong defence of partnership, its ethos and social embeddedness in these pages would encourage me to conclude.

Perhaps, in the end, where the book is most compelling is that it is only in the elite and large professional firms where leadership truly happens differently. In that case, perhaps it is not the

generalisability from those firms to other professional firms that we should focus on, but rather how the shifts that we know are already shaping the others will gradually infiltrate the elite firms and affect their leadership dynamics. That will be equally fascinating.

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