

Leadership Above the Line, Sarah Sumner (Tyndale House, 2006)

Having appreciated Sarah Sumner's previous book, *Men and Women in the Church*, a careful study of the theological issues around women in ministry, I was intrigued by this one. In many ways it is a very different book, aimed primarily at the business community, and introducing a character-based leadership tool which can be used by teams and individuals. It's a book about principled leadership, and if one can translate through the American business approach, it is a fascinating and rewarding read.

There are not many business books where to give away the 'story' would spoil the book! This is an exception. After a few brief chapters explaining the model - three sets of strengths and three sets of weaknesses - the bulk of the book is given over to the story of five people: John Mark (vice president of sales), Cynthia (his wife), Max (the company's CEO), Nathan (executive vice president), Lisa (Mark's mentoree, and consultant to Max).

I have to confess that I find the language of 'vice president of sales' off-putting, but the story and the principles which are drawn out of it kept me reading. And I won't give away the story, except to say that from time to time there are parallels drawn with biblical characters and situations, and the reader is drawn in to the story to apply the principles, gradually learning how they work as the story progresses. While the story is set in Philadelphia at a fictitious service company, it could, as the author says, happen anywhere, because the crux of it has to do with leadership and character development.

According to the 'People Model', there are basically three kinds of people: Strategists, Humanitarians and Diplomats. They each have strengths – and they have weaknesses. When people are using their strengths, they are working 'above the line'; when they succumb to the flip side of those strengths, the 'dark side' of their character, they slip 'below the line'. All of us have a mixture of the traits of all three types of people, but we all tend towards one. So as I read the book, I found myself reflecting both on myself (which type of person am I?) and on the fictional characters (which type is Cynthia? which type is Nathan?). This makes it a very unusual book: part narrative, part detective novel, part psychology, part business book – with some theology too.

Part 3 of the book covers the application of the model, and looks at three kinds of decision-making power: explanatory power to help people to grow in self-awareness, motivational power to help people desire to rise above the line, and creative power offering practical solutions to common problems.

Then, in the final part, there are three tools: tests to be used by individuals, observers of others, and to evaluate an organisation's behaviour. Finally, there's a nine-session workbook, designed to be used by small groups.

I am always pleased to read and review leadership books by women. Research suggests what women are less tolerant of moral lapse than are men, so it's good that at last there is a book by a woman which sits alongside titles such as *The Dark Side of Leadership*, and has insights which apply to women as well as men.

The subtitle of the book is 'a character-based leadership tool that leads to success for you and your team.' One would hope that there would be less need for a book like this among Christians than in the marketplace. However, when I hear about dysfunctional staff and leadership teams, I sometimes wonder. This book might be one solution – for those with ears to hear.