

axiom: powerful leadership proverbs

Bill Hybels (Zondervan, 2008)

Bill Hybels writes in his introduction how he sat down to read *The Powell Principles*, Colin Powell's twenty-four key principles of leadership, all consisting of just a few words. The book of Proverbs similarly 'serves up a truckload of weighty wisdom in bite-size chunks.' This book is Hybels' collection of 'axioms', leadership proverbs that have governed his ministry.

As senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, which influences many through the UK branch of the Willow Creek Association, Hybels is worth listening to. Hybels himself commends reading as an important activity for leaders who want to learn, and he also commends getting around great leaders. This book enables us to do both of those things.

There are 76 axioms, divided into four key areas of leadership: vision and strategy, teamwork and communication, activity and assessment, and personal integrity. This makes it a great book for dipping into, and each short chapter is only two or three pages long, taking just ten minutes to read. For those who are used to Hybels' style, this book is similar: a blend of anecdote, illustration and biblical wisdom.

Some of the axioms have become part of the language of leadership, at least in my circles: 'vision leaks', for example, and 'speed of the leaders, speed of the team'. Some of the American language I dislike, 'make the big ask', for example – but I have to admit that the subject is important, and one of the aspects of leadership I've often struggled with most. So as I read the axiom, I did so sceptically – but Hybels has a way of making things sound simple. 'People are actually quite flattered to be asked to do significant things for God', he reminds me. Yes, I know that, but... and then I find he's given me a simple framework to help me to use when occasions arise. And finally, I'm reminded that it usually takes a challenge to spur us on to new levels. Leaders are the ones who need to do the spurring!

I did not find every axiom equally valuable, and I suppose it would be surprising if I had. But many of these brief chapters reminded me of things I already knew, or put things in a clear and compelling way: when it comes to vision, 'paint the picture passionately'. We can all think of examples and know it's true – but easily forget when we have to do the painting. I liked the section on 'the value of a good idea', and the reminder that in order to find one good idea, you may need to listen to loads of mediocre ones.

In a similar way, I loved the reminder of the value of a 'blue-sky day': an opportunity to be creative and dream dreams. Even as I write this, I know that is not everyone's perfect day, though for a creative big-picture thinker like me it's heaven. The danger of getting into ruts, though, Hybels suggests, is a danger for any leader, and a little blue-sky thinking may take them to a new level.

Towards the end of the book, the axioms turn towards the biggest picture and the long-term view. 'What life are you waiting for?' is a good reminder that it's easy to put off difficult things, or to give in to fears – and perhaps to miss out on the best. 'Lead something' reminds us that the way to get better as a leader is to lead something! 'Finish well' focuses on how to leave an organisation in a God-honouring way – and how to finish well the assignment God has given us.

A book to read and ponder.

Rosie Ward © CPAS 2010