

Extraordinary leader

By TRENTON HIGHTOWER

I enjoy leadership development books the way some people plow through the Harry Potter series. Wizards, dementors, and dragons aside, it's information about how ordinary people go from good to great in the workplace that I find endlessly fascinating.

The book I read most recently on this topic is "The Extraordinary Leader: Going From Good to Great" by a pair of trailblazing authors in this subject area — Jack Zenger, and Joseph Folkman. Unlike some thinkers who believe extraordinary leaders are born, Zenger and Folkman believe that anyone can learn to be a great leader.

This book builds on a concept introduced by Jim Collins in his classic business development book "From Good to Great." What Collins

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Curriculum vitae

As Frederick Community College's associate vice president for customized training, Trenton Hightower oversees the training needs of more than 5,000 employees at 75 area companies. Mr. Hightower is a board member for the National Council for Continuing Education and Training. With a bachelor's in communications and public relations, and a master's in administration of higher education, Mr. Hightower still maintains his best education was basic training at Fort Benning, Ga., home of the Army's Infantry Branch.

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identified for organizations and companies Zenger and Folkman approach from an individual level.

Zenger and Folkman agree with the conventional wisdom: When you're a leader, knowledge is power. Accurate, effective decision-making depends on how much you know — about yourself, your staff, your vendors, your customers and the organization as a whole.

"The Extraordinary Leader" begins by defining 16 core competencies of high-performing leaders. The authors began by collecting quantitative data from a scientific analysis of more than 25,000 real leaders. They concluded that leaders who move from "good" to "a little bit better" don't make much of a difference. It's not until one becomes a great leader that there will be any significant impact.

What separates Zenger and Folkman's point of view from others like them is a matter of focus. Rather than work on remediating weaknesses, say the authors,

extraordinary leaders focus on building on and leading with their strengths.

Extraordinary leaders, say Zenger and Folkman, surround themselves with partners and associates who complement them, whose skill sets are strong in areas where theirs are weak. Making these kinds of connections and accommodations, they contend, is the foundation on which great leadership rests.

Another tool leaders are embracing to help in their fact-finding efforts is the 360-degree assessment. Commonly used in management and leadership development programs, the 360-degree assessment also focuses on personal skills — communication, conflict resolution and relationship-building — and core competency evaluations.

Thought to be less subjective than the traditional evaluation, the process begins with the participant's self-assessment. Feedback is also collected from supervisors, peers, direct reports, customers, and sometimes vendors.

Studies show that work performance improves when people

receive 360-degree assessment feedback, and individuals who have the greatest skill or personality deficits benefit most.

While current best practices regarding leadership recommend collaboration, inclusion, consensus and empowerment, at the end of the day, the buck has to stop somewhere. And when you're the CEO, it rests squarely on your desk.

Along with the perks and pleasures of a top-level job, is the ultimate responsibility for quite a few difficult decisions. It makes sense to take a good look at your leadership skills on a regular basis, and chart a course for augmenting your weaknesses — and building on your strengths.

If you're currently in charge of a company or a business owner, chances are you're a good leader. Picking up a book like "The Extraordinary Leader," however, just might be your passport from good to great.

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