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Review: Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader **by Herminia Ibarra**

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Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader, by Herminia Ibarra, *Harvard Business Review Press*, \$30 (£20)

Ten years ago, Herminia Ibarra was “dragged kicking and screaming” into a job as chair of her department at Insead, the business school. A year into the new role, she was frustrated, exhausted and fed up with the way it was draining the time she used to spend writing and researching.

“My limited view of the job was negatively self-reinforcing,” Ibarra writes. “Instead of driving an agenda of things I wanted to accomplish, I stayed in reactive mode, doing the least rewarding of the administrative tasks.” The situation will be all too familiar to many operating executives and professionals who are promoted because they do great work, only to find, once promoted, they no longer have time to do it.

Happily, Ibarra’s excellent, concise and practical guide offers many ways for leaders to climb out of “the competency trap” and devote more time to four important responsibilities: building bridges between their team and others outside it; crafting and explaining their vision of the future; engaging people in change; and “embodying the change”.

Leaders work outside the established goals, procedures and structures to which managers must stick, Ibarra writes. But as her title makes clear, thinking about how you are going to lead will not make you a leader. Ibarra’s research, and that of others, shows, instead, that “people become leaders by doing leadership work”, a principle she calls “outsight”, to distinguish it from more inward- and backward-looking insights.

To connoisseurs of management guff, this oversight will sound like another unhelpful neologism. But Ibarra’s approach is pragmatic and sensitive to the reality of the daily existence of harassed leaders, many

of whom she has studied and interviewed for her research. Only occasionally does the book slip further into jargon.

She offers intensely practical advice about cultivating a network, for instance, addressing head-on many people's sense that networking is "essentially insincere or manipulative", and advising how to overcome it, complete with practical exercises. (I should point out here that Ibarra is a judge of the Business Book of the Year [Award](#), which I help organise, and so a useful part of my network.)

She also writes wisely about the importance of a couple of areas of leadership thinking that usually make me feel queasy — "[authenticity](#)" and "[story-telling](#)". Again, the risk is being trapped. Leaders may need to experiment with new identities or stories to avoid being held back by old versions.

Above all, Ibarra is realistic about what happens when people move to leadership roles. It is "more like becoming a great chef than following a recipe", she says. As a result, it can be "unpredictable, messy, non-linear, and emotionally charged".

In an uncertain world, where leaders should be constantly learning and adapting, Ibarra's suggestions are far more useful than the countless glib formulas that many books offer as a firm prescription. Too often, they advise leaders about how to start at A and proceed in a straight line to B, the objective they have set themselves. But, as Ibarra points out, "B changes as we approach it."

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