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“Leadership on the Field of Play”

Bill Pepicello’s Book Review

Doctor Bill Pepicello’s book “Leadership on the Field of Play” is the subject of research for this review. Doctor Pepicello was the sixth President of the University of Phoenix. This book is a testament of his unique leadership experience.

Keywords: Bill Pepicello, “Leadership on the Field of Play”, education, leadership, experience.



*Some books are to be tasted,
others to be swallowed,
and some few to be chewed and digested.
Francis Bacon, *The Essays**

Today’s educational and industrial landscape is dominated by breakthrough innovations with artificial intelligence, augmented reality, big data, etc., which requires in-depth restructuring of all the leadership and management institutes and bringing in the new generation of competent business executives – leaders and managers of an innovative type. To cater to their educational needs, thousands of publications on leadership appear every year (according to some sources, this figure is as high as 4.8 billion – Carlson, 2020). With the numbers of books so high, why should our attention be given to *Leadership on the Field of Play* by Dr. Bill Pepicello? – Because it is different.

Francis Bacon once wrote a phrase that became famous: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few are to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention”.

Leadership on the Field of Play is to be indulged in and savored at the moments of thought over an intellectually challenging conversation with the author. Because this is how this book was written.

This book is not a theoretical exploration with definitions and research results, not a textbook with laws of leadership and activities, not a ‘recipe’ book

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for beginner leaders to follow. It is a book of keen observations and thoughtful reflections over the author's rich history of success and accomplishment in leading one of the world's most distinguished institutions towards its heights, shared generously and playfully with an engaged and intellectually thirsty interlocutor.

The author starts his book with a question: "Why would anyone want to read this?"

The answer is, primarily, in the personality of the author – Dr. Bill Pepicello, an outstanding leader in the world higher education, the sixth President of the University of Phoenix. Starting his mission in higher education as an assistant professor, during his over 40 year-career in higher education, Dr. Pepicello served as Dean, School of Advanced Studies; Vice Provost; Provost and finally, President of the beacon of revolutionary innovations in the history of the world higher education – the University of Phoenix.

I have been genuinely blessed, after decades of professorship, higher education leadership, and intense pursuits of breakthrough innovations and newest benchmarks in higher education, to collaborate with my American colleagues in the study of the andragogic philosophy and methodologies, interactive self-directed learning, online and hybrid educational modalities. I found a rich treasury of such innovations at the University of Phoenix – once the most advanced and fastest growing private university in the United States.

Not only was I fascinated at its mere size – more than 400,000 students in physical classrooms and online in almost every state of the huge country, and many abroad. The creativity of this institution, its student friendliness, openness to intellectual challenge and alignment with practice were beyond any comparison and expectation. I was genuinely intrigued: how is this huge Ark steered? What laws of organization, leadership and management underlie the creation, life and development of this harmonious ecosystem?

And its development was highly dynamic! During Dr. Pepicello's presidency, the University of Phoenix grew to be the largest private university in the US. It became one of America's flagships of revolutionary innovations in the history of 21st century higher education, implementing and introducing to the world the breakthrough benchmarks: interactive learning philosophy and computerized learning systems for all three educational modalities (face-to-face, online and hybrid). Its innovative ideas were later successfully implemented by numerous larger and smaller universities in the US and the entire world, changing forever the face of the higher education landscape.

The University of Phoenix has provided college degrees to more than one million graduates from all walks of life in the US, including historically underprivileged and socially excluded populations. Many students who could not afford higher education due to socio-economic and demographic reasons, became first-generation graduates in their families, among them, the largest

number of black women graduating with MBA degrees in the country. This is truly an exceptional service to the community!

Of course, this unique leadership experience would have been impossible without an ingenious and unique leadership approach, strategy, system and style – everything that makes it so different and special, – and I was eager to look into this secret treasury of leadership wisdom.

Dr. Pepicello's book comes as a genuine gift to anyone who is, like myself, eager to see the backstage of success – dynamic leadership in the field of play, so different from the familiar classical examples of European universities. This book, the author writes, “is about where leadership took me and what I learned along the way”, – and that was an exciting journey. Leadership took the author, “among other places”, to The Atlantic magazine, and to ABC's Nightline, and – to the front page of the Sunday New York Times “above the fold”, which means it was the most important and compelling story, aimed to attract the readers. The notes made on this journey may provide us, readers, with thought-provoking insights to learn from.

The book abounds in aphoristic expressions that stir your internal dialogue. Full of wise quotes and deep thoughts, it presents us with a variety of real-life situations in which hard choices bring out a leader. “Leaders are not made. They are exposed” – I cannot but agree with this, especially considering leadership in an educational organization, where every individual is unique, intellectual and creative: you cannot manage them without being a leader.

Thinking of a leader of the world's most innovative university, where academic operations were highly computerized already 30 years ago to effectively manage its services to an almost half-million student population, offering them a wide choice of face-to-face, online, and hybrid educational programs in 225 physical campuses in the U.S. and abroad, one might expect that the secret is in technology-based augmented leadership, data driven decision making and advanced use of computerized solutions.

Yet, *Leadership on the Field of Play* reveals a highly human face of academic leadership – rich in keen observations, wise reflections and mild humor. Dr. Pepicello is simply sharing his rich experiences in leading his people through thick and thin, “providing direction when and where it is needed, [a]nd doing it in a way that makes others feel comfortable and valued”. In his life, he was following his major rule: “doing the best way I could whatever my job was”. He demonstrates the importance of vital human traits – integrity, responsibility, humility and compassion – for the leaders to empower their teams.

Many ideas of the book under review go far beyond the claimed field of play: they may prompt the tips for successful human interactions, conflict-management, relation-building and ultimately, persuasive and impactful communications with others, whether your employees, your boss(es), your partners or your competitors. One of the most effective is, in my opinion,

perspective-switching. Not only does it allow one to see the world through the others' eyes: it also enables one to eradicate the root of the conflict, to lead "from the inside", to reconcile the positions in negotiations and win the competitive advantage.

Leadership on the Field of Play is the evidence of the author's life-long learning and living through the ideas that have been crystalized on its pages. Allusions to literary works and popular movies, vivid anecdotes, baseball metaphors, numerous life situations and mild humor make the author's reflections engaging and entertaining to read. Yet, many a time this book made me stop and contemplate more deeply on my experiences, and learn from them. Making you desirous of learning is another quality of a great leader, especially on the education field of play.

Reading this book, you understand that it was written to become a dialogue with a thoughtful reader – current or future leader – who is as dedicated to their vocation as the author, willing to hone their thoughts and skills, and step onto the field of play at the right moment. It is an engaging piece, in which you may return to some places over and over again, savoring their in-depth sense and finding solutions to some long-lingering questions.

With all its wisdom, *Leadership on the Field of Play* is an invaluable treasury for a new generation of leaders, not because it provides "recipes" or "strategies for success", but because in all life situations its author is on the side of the highest moral values – responsibility and accountability to your followers, loyalty and trust, humility and sacrifice of one's ego to the team. The highest success, as has been convincingly demonstrated by the author, comes from respecting predecessors, valuing what already exists, yet making your own footprint.

Dr. Pepicello's footprint cannot be described in a few words. He has made history as a leader of the largest private university in the United States, the university whose breakthrough academic and organizational innovations and benchmarks, newest educational technologies and approaches, along with unique experience of their implementation, set a new standard of higher education in the world. The University of Phoenix was like a space launch vehicle, bringing the world of higher education into a new orbit, giving it a new face.

It is undoubted that many facets of this rich and unique leadership experience may give a lot of value to the leaders in education – and beyond: "... although the game may change, the fundamentals of leadership do not". Leaders or prospective leaders in all fields are likely to learn a lot from this book.

So, "Why would anyone want to read this?" – Because it is an amazing opportunity to engage in an enlightening and empowering conversation with a successful and thoughtful leader.

I would highly recommend the book *Leadership on the Field of Play* written by Dr. Bill Pepicello to new and seasoned leaders: enjoy the beauty of words, indulge in the Socratic dialogue with the author, reflect on your leadership experiences, and – step onto the field of play. Because “That’s where leadership counts.”

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It seems that leadership books outnumber good leaders by ten to one. Why? *The Startup*. 2020, March 11. <https://medium.com/swlh/with-so-many-leadership-books-why-are-there-so-many-bad-leaders-28651431cfb3>

Тетяна Андрієнко-Генін. «Лідерство на ігровому полі». Рецензія на книгу Білла Пепічелло

Книга доктора Білла Пепічелло «Лідерство на полі гри» є предметом дослідження для цього огляду. Доктор Пепічелло був шостим президентом Університету Фенікса. Ця книга є свідченням його унікального лідерського досвіду.

Ключові слова: Білл Пепічелло, «Лідерство на ігровому полі», освіта, лідерство, досвід.

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