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Review of "A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules: Managing Risk and Leadership" by Dave Oliver

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Book Reviews



Dave Oliver. *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules: Managing Risk and Leadership*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2021. Pp. 252.

Periodically, autobiography and biography aficionados will come across anecdotes and relayed tales that push the boundaries of credulity. The skeptical question of ‘*did that really happen?*’ skirts around at the edges of the brain. These are often the best reads: the books that shed illuminating light onto the strange features of places, events and processes that would otherwise go unknown. *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules: Managing Risk and Leadership* is full of such stories, whether regaling readers with the author's station on a boat that had over one-thousand fires within a three-year period or discussing times where severe organisational dysfunction irreversibly affected individuals' lives. These tales contribute to a holistically captivating read, engaging readers even as it guides them through practical recommendations, personal reflections and ethical considerations.

The book centres on the concept of a ‘bronze rule,’ a principle of leadership that Admiral Dave Oliver developed over the course of his career. A bronze rule is a guiding value, moral or tenet that shapes behaviour and decision-making—particularly in leadership—and can emerge from a professional, personal or reflective situation. People may adopt or integrate another person's bronze rule into their own repository, but bronze rules are, ultimately, highly personalised principles. As such, they survive when put under stress—moreover, they may become stronger as a result of challenge. *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules* seems to be less of a guide, given the personal nature of principle adoption and refinement, but rather an encouragement for the necessity of having a set of core principles. The central premise of the book appears to be that, given the challenges and stresses

of leadership, an ethical and responsible leader should take every opportunity to develop a core set of principles to guide them when they are pushed to the limits.

Given Oliver's long career of varied experiences and high-level decisions, he is uniquely situated to know the value of having a core set of guiding rules. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy (1963), Oliver's navy career saw him command diesel and nuclear submarines during the Cold War, serve as Principal Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition and receive six Legion of Merit Awards. Since his military retirement in 1995, Oliver's experiences include serving as executive vice president of the European Aeronautic Defense and Space Company, director of the American Superconductor Corporation and as an independent consultant.

Oliver provides a solid explanation as to why he draws from many personal experiences in articulating his bronze rules: examples anchor principles in the mind. One need only select any individual from among a list of great philosophers, religious figures and orators to see the role storytelling plays in ingraining a moral or message. As a result, the book is not just a leadership development text, but more akin to a memoir with the ability and potential to teach.

A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules comprises thirty-six chapters: thirty-five chapters dedicated to a single bronze rule and a thirty-sixth chapter providing a brief overview of each rule. The rules are organised along four book parts: "Personal Traits a Leader Should Strive to Strengthen," "Perennial Problems a Leader Will Encounter," "Techniques a Leader May Find Useful" and "Special Approaches for Senior Leaders." While Oliver advances thirty-five bronze rules, there is one central principle that rests at the core of all others: never compromise your ethics or your integrity.

Even as Oliver advances comprehensive and numerous principles for leaders, he also notes that leadership is a highly individual state of improvement. Indeed, in the preface, he encourages readers to not follow the successful methods of others (including, presumably, himself) blindly (p. xi). Instead, readers come away with the impression that self-knowledge (including an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses) is not the only tool that will help individuals wield leadership. The willingness to observe and analyse specific situations to determine the most fitting response also matters significantly for successful leadership.

Fascinating stories emerge across all four of the book sections. Oliver identifies routine, as well as atypical, challenges that a leader may face, from the more standard need to think outside the box and challenge standard operating procedures (pp. 11-14) to the need to draw a line (at the personal or organisational level) between a 'tough love' leader and a bully (pp. 73-78). Some of the most notable bronze rules in the text are found within Chapter 7 "Hard Bodies or Leaders" and Chapter 16 "Tough but Unfair." "Hard Bodies or Leaders" illustrates the importance of good leadership to seize on once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, particularly in the remarkable tendencies of organisations and individuals to become stuck in complacency (pp. 34-37). Meanwhile, "Tough But Unfair" critiques the notion of the 'tough but fair' leader, instead suggesting that 'tough' leaders that struggle with uncertainty are more likely to harm their organisations by putting pressure on individuals, rather than supporting subordinates as they grow into their roles (pp. 96-99).

While Oliver's expansive stories create an engaging book, their number does make it more challenging for readers to recall the specific, primary lesson a story endorses. Thankfully, the final chapter acts as a reference 'cheat sheet' for all thirty-five bronze rules. These five pages (pp. 208-212) summarise the lesson of each chapter and links it to the general events of the chapter's story. *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules* would have been harder to navigate without this resource, as the lead up and drama of specific stories can sometimes stand out in a reader's mind more so than the specific lesson they are trying to recall.

The most notable way in which *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules* is distinct from other principle-development books like *Be a Motivational Leader* or *Laws of Leadership* and finds an emphasis not fully present in his previous book, *Lead On*, is that it does not gloss over the inherent stresses and risks of leadership.¹ Oliver does not presume that all readers should be expected to take on the responsibility of leadership. Instead, he provides recommendations for those who wish to shoulder the responsibilities, despite the risks, challenges and uncertainties of leadership. He drives this point home

¹ LeRoy Eims, *Be a Motivational Leader: Lasting Leadership Principles* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2012); John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1998); and Dave Oliver, Jr., *Lead On!: A Practical Guide to Leadership* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1992).

particularly strongly in the afterword. There, he articulates a rule he developed when in charge of about sixty-five commanders who drove nuclear attack submarines: the 10-80-10 rule. The rule presumes that if war broke out, 10 per cent of commanding officers would get 80 per cent of the submarine kills, 80 per cent would sink the remaining 20 per cent and the remaining 10 per cent would “do well to safely get out of their home ports” (p. 213). In this case, the responsibility he shouldered as a leader was the recognition that any of the commanders could lose their life in war. As such, it was his duty to value and support the growth of himself, his subordinates and his organisation during peace, choose engagements carefully and limit his battles to those worth fighting.

The second way in which *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules* stands out is the basis by which Oliver identifies and communicates his principles: he relies entirely on stories. While he primarily draws from his own experiences, he does occasionally leverage historical examples if it best conveys the importance or centrality of a principle. This is somewhat atypical of leadership principle books, which often bring in psychology or sociology frameworks to provide a core theory or principle of leadership. In this regard, *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules* is reminiscent of a devotional, with short, digestible chapters, each containing a moral-like takeaway.

Ultimately, readers will find themselves with a gripping book that they will likely want to re-read, if only to review bronze rules for potential adoption into their own personal principle toolkit. *A Navy Admiral's Bronze Rules* is fitting for readers with military experience, leadership experience or leadership aspirations alike. The interpersonal narrative style is particularly appealing and will make the book more pleasing to readers who otherwise prefer audio or interpersonal learning. The book will also be interesting for aspiring leaders, regardless of whether they are in the military, public service or private sector. No matter where a leader is situated, after all, it is important for them to have keenly developed principles.

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