

Book Review: Leading Professionals: Power, Politics and Prima Donnas by Laura Empson

In Leading Professionals: Power, Politics and Prima Donnas, Laura Empson explores the nature and foundations of leadership, its impact on the trajectory of professional organisations and how power and politics are implicated in it. Drawing upon over 500 interviews with professionals, the book offers insights on how organisations cope with internal politics and achieve collective action that will be of relevance to numerous sectors, finds M Kerem Coban.

Leading Professionals: Power, Politics and Prima Donnas. Laura Empson. Oxford University Press. 2017.

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Leading Professionals: Power, Politics and Prima Donnas casts light upon leadership, its impact on the trajectory of professional organisations and, most importantly, the power and politics within them. The book has two interlinked strengths. Firstly, Laura Empson, the author, was an investment banker and a strategy consultant before becoming an academic. Secondly, more than 500 interviews support the empirics analysed in the book.

The first part of *Leading Professionals* presents the foundations of leadership. Politics is an unavoidable and perhaps indispensable feature of interactions. In any organisation, politics determines 'whose interests count more'. And this is regulated by each actor's power. Power also determines relations between individuals through socialising them into particular norms and belief systems. In this light, the book seeks to discover how individuals build consensus, exert power over peers and succeed (or sometimes fail) in generating collective action.

Being a leader, or gaining that status, requires 'legitimising', 'manoeuvring' and 'negotiating'. These are not easily performed. The author claims that a politically adept individual needs 'social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity' (51). What the author thus calls the 'micro-politics' of establishing and sustaining leadership relies on such skills.

Chapter Four discusses a critical challenge for professionals: the balance between private and collective interest. Each organisation has a unique culture, which the author calls *partnership ethos*. Socialisation ensures that professionals prioritise the collective interest through the internalisation of the norms and rules that organisational culture imposes upon them. The end product of this process is self-regulation (prioritisation of the collective action without external stimulus), complemented by peer pressure and formal processes (e.g. evaluation, sanctions and rewards).

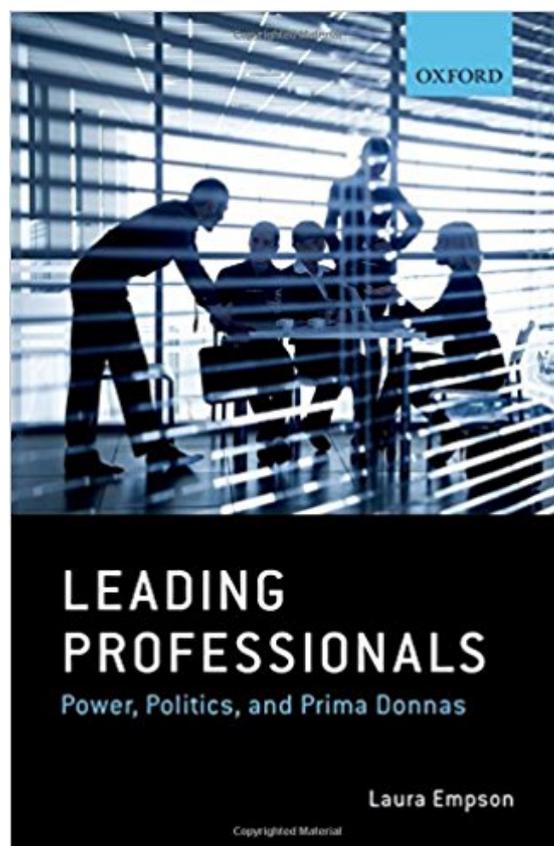




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The second part of the book concentrates on individual professionals and how they influence governance. Firstly, the author presents leadership dyads in Chapter Five. In these, one is more concerned with production (e.g. profitability, performance), whereas the other cares more about people (e.g. culture, governance) in the organisation. Depending on relations and roles, the dyad may perform effectively. However, there are cases of failures as well, such as when the two actors have equal power and conflict is centralised within the dyad, or if this is unequal and conflict is externalised with the involvement of other parties.

Second, the book discusses 'insecure overachievers' (Chapter Six): those who do not have job security in spite of their outstanding performance. This occurs due either to individuals' personal psychological tendencies or structural dynamics, such as the fierce competition for jobs, organisational culture and promotion processes, among others. Relying on these factors, leaders exert immense power over lower-rank professionals who perform well but can never feel safe. While the agency of the latter is often limited, the author suggests that they can still become institutional entrepreneurs as long as they know how to play the micro-politics mentioned above, and possess or rely on formal authority, specialist expertise and social capital.

In the last part of the book, the author discusses the impact of leadership on the evolution of organisations. As organisations develop and have a more sophisticated organisational structure, authority becomes more diffused among multiple ranks (i.e. a shift from founder-centred to several other delegated authority forms in an organisation). At a later stage of development, more authority is asked, which disconnects owners/shareholders from managers and other lower-rank professionals. As these critical junctures refer to structural shifts in the organisation, leaders need to cope with such crises as autonomy becomes more and more diffused as organisations age. Managing these obviously requires social and political skills to manoeuvre and therefore sustain a smooth transition from one structure to another.

The author also mentions how mergers are managed in Chapter Nine. Since these ask professionals who have not previously worked together to share a common understanding, professionals might fear that the 'superior' could feel that the other does not have adequate expertise, for instance, or that their involvement may 'contaminate' the organisation. The 'school dance' analogy proposes that leaders can work separately, concentrating on distinct roles (Figure 9.1, 189). This initial period is followed by a transition towards more emphasis on shared goals; finally, integration is achieved in four years.

In Chapter Ten, the author discusses how consensus could be built to respond to crises. Leaders initially resort to hierarchy (i.e. authority). They then switch to a shared process through which a collective response (i.e. consensus) is assured through inducing others to take part in the process. Consensus-building is facilitated if professionals share common values, have close relationships and mutual trust and if the organisation has a career-long tenure system (Figure 10.2, 203).

It is clear that *Leading Professionals* is not about theory-testing or proposing novel methodologies. Its core objective is to shed light on how professional organisations cope with intra-organisational politics and achieve collective action. While this may serve many objectives, for theory-driven scholars the book does a disservice to its unique qualitative dataset of 500 interviews (most of which informs the discussion throughout the book in direct quotes). Such anecdotal evidence could have been better mobilised to contribute to theory or to produce hypotheses to be tested in future research. As each chapter seems to stand alone, focusing on separate dimensions of leadership and politics in professional organisations, mobilising a rich dataset driven by a broader theoretical/conceptual perspective might have made the chapters fit together better as well.

Leading Professionals could also have drawn from [polycentricity](#), which could inform the reader about how multiple centres of power cope with the fragmentation of authority, coordination and accountability, and how competing interpretations or definitions of the collective interest are resolved. More importantly, the book could also have been driven more by [the theory of fields](#), whereby (social) change or order is a result of 'strategic interaction' between actors in a 'field' that is organised according to particular terms of interaction (i.e. norms, rules) which regulate relations between them. At the very beginning of the book, a Practice Head of a law firm summarises their challenges in maintaining order in a polycentric, interdependent and politically challenging environment:

I am responsible for a large group of partners [...] The process of leading is about building consensus. It's not easy because most people are attracted to this business because they are independent, they like doing their own thing. Essentially they want to be left alone until it's something that kind of connects with them and then it's: Why wasn't I consulted? (1)

The sustainability of professional organisations can be conceived as a common-resource pool problem for employees. Thus, the challenges of consensus-building in environments with multiple poles of power, and in which insiders and outsiders engage in incessant 'micro-politics', could have been informed by both polycentricity and the theory of fields.

Yet, all in all, Empson cautions from the very beginning of the book that readers should neither expect to find a theoretical, scholarly account nor a blueprint on how to be a leader. The strength and main contribution of *Leading Professionals* originates from its capacity to speak to various literatures and fields. Relying on this, the discussion can be applied not only to intra-organisational dynamics of leadership and its politics in professional organisations, but also to those in the public sector. Admittedly, the two are run according to dissimilar dynamics, such as the varying influence of politicians, and potentially divergent core motivations regarding 'public interest' and 'private interest'. Still, if they hold anything in common, both are subject to politics, the challenges of building consensus and engaging with multiple levels of policy-making. Therefore, many insights offered in this book could be applied to various contexts, not solely to one particular type of professional organisation.

M Kerem Coban completed a PhD in Public Policy at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore in late 2017. His doctoral thesis studied the political economy of banking regulation in the post-global financial crisis period in Turkey with a focus on financial consumer protection, macroprudential regulatory governance and compliance with Basel III. You can find more information [here](#). [Read more by M Kerem Coban](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.