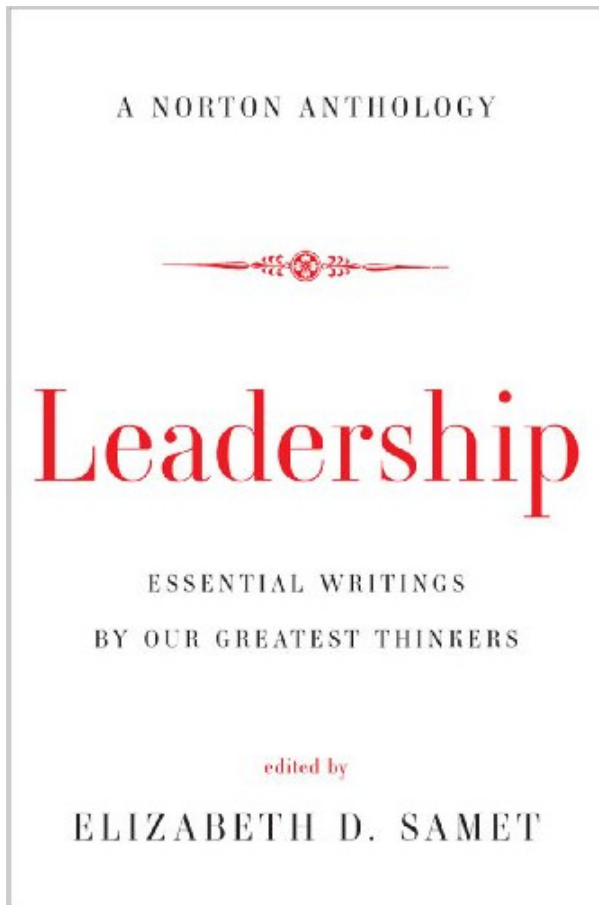


'Leadership: Essential Writings' a masterpiece

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"Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers," edited by Elizabeth D. Samet. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015, 748 pages, \$35.



"To contribute meaningfully to any institution or organization, to say nothing of leading it effectively, one must work to understand its systems and structures, as well as the various smaller communities and associations operating within it," Elizabeth D. Samet explains in "Studying the System," the inaugural chapter in "Leadership: Essential Writings by Our Greatest Thinkers," the new book she edited. "To understand the nuances of the culture in which a leader finds herself, she must become, to borrow a term from anthropology, a 'participant-observer': a kind of ethnographer who learns the intricacies of an organization by studying it as if it were a new culture."

In a nutshell, this is precisely the posture Samet adopts as she goes about identifying the world's most significant contributions to the collective canon on leadership. Truth be told, leadership is a subject that has fascinated most of us since we first gained the ability to express ourselves in written form. Any serious student of the discipline will find this collection invaluable; the lessons for the somewhat more casual enthusiast are equally palpable. Samet has managed to capture the essence of what leadership is – and what it is not – in this surprisingly

inclusive compilation of some of the greatest insights into the complex nature of the process ever assembled.

Samet is a professor of English at West Point. She has a B.A. from Harvard and a Ph.D. in English literature from Yale. She served on the U.S. Army Chief of Staff's Task Force on Leader Development and is a much sought-after speaker at both civilian and military conferences and professional meetings. Her essays and reviews have appeared in the New York Times magazine, the New York Times book review and the New Republic. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, she also won a Los Angeles Times book prize and a Hiett Prize in Humanities. Her previous books include "No Man's Land: Preparing for War and Peace in Post-9/11 America," "Willing Obedience: Citizens, Soldiers, and the Progress of Consent in America, 1776-1898" and "Soldier's Heart: Reading Literature Through Peace and War at West Point," which the New York Times named one of the 100 Notable Books of 2007.

“Leadership” is comprised of 11 major sections that pretty much cover the entire spectrum of the genre. There are a couple of features about this volume I found especially interesting. First is Samet’s inclusion of a series of relatively short “albums” that follow most of the chapters; these serve to profile the exceptional individuals previously showcased. I was familiar with many of the authors whose works are enshrined in this tome; indeed, many of the writers are very well known. Still, the additional information allowed me get a better sense of who they were on a number of different levels.

A second attribute I found particularly appealing was the set of discussion questions Samet posed at the conclusion of each chapter. For example, at the end of “Learning from Failure,” the eighth installment consisting of six reasonably concise biographical notations as well as a brief representative selection from the offerings of each leader, a series of thought-provoking queries are presented as a means of stimulating reflection on how their points of view compare and contrast. These include: “How do various systems of promotion and compensation encourage or discourage risk-taking and constructive failure?” and “Is failure simply an inevitable outcome of which we make the best – a convenient virtue? Or is it an intrinsically good thing?”

Obviously the idea is that after you have examined – in their own words augmented by a more accurate perspective that tends to develop with the passage of time – the failures of Anne Fadiman, Herodotus, Plutarch, Babur, Ulysses S. Grant and Czeslaw Milosz, the reader should be able to approach these inherently philosophical propositions in a more definitive and realistic manner.

Unlike many books I have had occasion to read over the last few years, it was very difficult to identify any passages from “Leadership” I would consider my favorite. All of the compositions Samet includes have considerable merit and warrant in-depth reflection; there is no “filler” in this anthology. If pressed to accentuate an excerpt that serves to convey the overall tone of the manuscript, a good candidate would probably be the following from “The Defense of Freedom and Peace,” a radio broadcast Winston Churchill made “to the people of the United States” in 1938 before he became the prime minister:

“One may put this question in the largest form. Has any benefit or progress ever been achieved by the human race by submission to organized and calculated violence? As we look back over the long history of the nations we must see that, on the contrary, their glory has been founded upon the spirit of resistance to tyranny and injustice, especially when these evils seemed to be backed by heavier force. Since the dawn of the Christian era a certain way of life has slowly been shaping itself among the Western peoples, and certain standards of conduct and government have come to be esteemed. After many miseries and prolonged confusion, there arose into the broad light of day the conception of the right of the individual; his right to be consulted in the government of his country; his right to invoke the law even against the State itself.”

I could not have said it better myself. In fact, I doubt anyone reading this review could have said it any better. And Churchill’s address is only one isolated example of the profound insights Samet includes in this masterpiece. I plan to keep this resource close by as I prepare lectures, presentations, workshops, training sessions and keynotes. If you want the entire history and evolution of leadership in one exceptionally accessible volume, you could do a lot worse than this awesome new Norton Anthology. I recommend it highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*

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