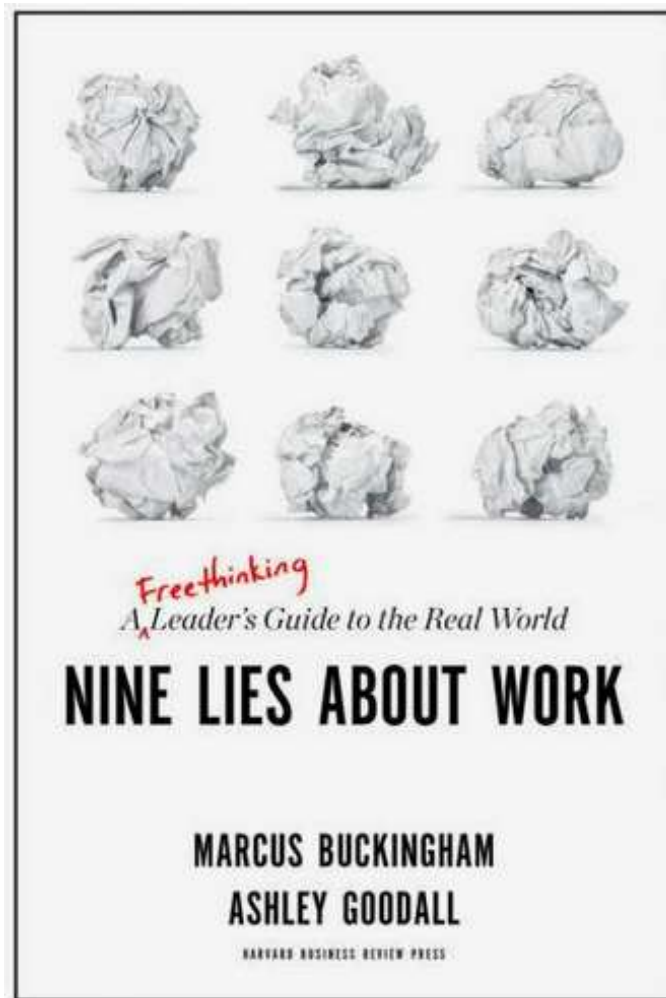


‘Nine Lies’ can lead to happiness

Posted: Sunday, September 2, 2019

“Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader’s Guide to the Real World” by Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2019, 256 pages, \$30 (hardcover).



“We began the book with a paradox,” Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall explain near the beginning of “Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader’s Guide to the Real World,” their new revolutionary assault on many of the foundational principles most leaders have taken for granted during the past few decades. “Why do so many of the ideas and practices that are held as settled truths at work wind up being so deeply frustrating to, and unpopular with, the very people they are supposed to serve?”

“Why, for example, is it a settled truth that having your goals cascaded down upon you from above is the best way to align and evaluate your work, when those of us in the trenches feel the yearly goal-setting process to be meaningless rigmarole with little connection to our actual work?” the authors continue. “Why is it settled truth that you need critical feedback, when, in the real world, most of us lean away from such feedback, and feel more inclined to give it to the other guy than to get it ourselves? Why is it settled truth that your manager can reliably rate you on your performance, when, on actual teams, none of us has ever met a team

leader blessed with perfect objectivity?”

All legitimate questions as far as I am concerned – questions many of us have no doubt thought about from time to time, but never had the courage to actually articulate. And to be honest, the premises they are built upon do seem to be solidly consecrated in the proverbial canon of evidence-based best practices. After reading this groundbreaking exposé of the faulty logic behind many of those tenets, however, you may come away with an entirely different view of what constitutes leadership – if it is still appropriate to call it that – in the 21st century.

“Nine Lies” consists of an introduction followed by nine relatively-succinct chapters, each devoted to one of the “lies” that form the architecture for the manuscript. Also included are two appendices that I found especially interesting, “The ADP Research Institute’s Global Study of Engagement” by Mary Hayes and Corrine Wright, which has implications for all industries – including higher education – and “Seven Things We Know for Sure at Cisco” by Roxanne Bisby Davis and Goodall,

which I found similarly thought-provoking. Finally, the book is moderately researched, with five pages of source notes at the conclusion of the main text.

At the core of the thesis championed by Buckingham and Goodall are a list of beliefs held by many managers and leaders – beliefs that the authors make a convincing case are misguided and contribute to the lack of success we are currently seeing in many companies, agencies and organizations in all sectors of the economy. These include (1) People care which company they work for, (2) The best plan wins, (3) The best companies cascade goals, (4) The best people are well-rounded, (5) People need feedback, (6) People can reliably rate other people, (7) People have potential, (8) Work-life balance matters most, and (9) Leadership is a thing. Take a moment to wrap your head around those assertions, many of which are obviously counterintuitive.

If your initial reaction to these “lies” was anything like mine, you probably were left with a somewhat skeptical perspective regarding just how well Buckingham and Goodall truly understood their subject matter. In fact, as I began reading this astute little primer, I found myself becoming increasingly cynical about the ultimate enlightenment I might be able to glean from their endeavor – even though it was on the best-sellers list. The deeper I got into their prose, however, the more I felt they were onto something profound and potentially even paradigm-shifting. Once I really got into the book – and left behind my preconceived notions about what constitutes good leadership – I began to see how their logic makes perfect sense, at least in many instances.

Consider the following passage from “People have Potential,” the seventh chapter and one I found to be especially instructive. By the way, Maureen is one of the many fictitious employees and team members that populate the book and serve to illustrate and reinforce the overarching case being made by the authors.

“Potential is a one-sided evaluation. Momentum is an ongoing conversation. In a world of ‘potential,’ it’s hard to imagine what, exactly, a career conversation looks like once Maureen shunted off into the lo-po (low potential) dungeon. Momentum, on the other hand, represents the opposite of ‘up-or-out’ thinking. And it’s the best concept to address one of the key survey items that measure engagement and performance: ‘In my work, I am always challenged to grow.’ Potential doesn’t do that – it doesn’t challenge you to grow. It tells you that you either will, or you won’t.”

Buckingham founded The Marcus Buckingham Co. in 2006, which was acquired by ADP Research Institute in 2017, where he currently heads all people and performance research. He has a degree in social and political sciences from Pembroke College, Cambridge. His previous books include “First, Break All the Rules: What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently,” which he co-wrote with Curt Coffman, and “Discover Your Strengths,” co-authored with Donald O. Clifton.

Goodall was director and chief learning officer, leader development, at Deloitte before assuming his current position as senior vice president of leadership and team intelligence at Cisco. He has a B.A. in music from University College, Oxford, and an M.B.A. from Columbia Business School. This is his first book.

As you may have been able to surmise, I liked this one. “Nine Lies” is one of those rare contributions that can lead to a more practical understanding of what is really going on when we are interacting with our co-workers. More importantly, Buckingham and Goodall could help you be more successful (and happy) both with your career and with life in general. Pick up a copy.

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