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Cracking the Code to Leadership

A book review by David Pellegrin, CEO, Honolulu Publishing

Bookstores are lined with books on leadership. As the authors of Cracking the Code themselves put it, leadership “is the second most written about word in the English language.”

What makes this book a must-buy with real take-home value is its unique focus, not on the WHAT but on the HOW: How to inspire others to wholeheartedly commit to a common course of action.

In Cracking the Code, listening skills are taken to a whole new level of understanding. The authors present the “Decision Ladder,” a device for understanding various levels of motivation and attitudes. They follow this with practical tips and exercises for being able to gauge these various levels in others within 10 seconds or less with 90% accuracy.

In addition to the take-home value, there’s an elegance in some of the discussion of real-world examples that Cracking the Code offers. President Reagan’s speech on the Berlin Wall and Dr. Martin Luther King’s “*I Have a Dream*” speech are deconstructed using the “Decision Ladder.” The authors break down the magic of these two powerful speeches, and help us understand how we, with our far more modest goals, can move others to commitment.

Not too long ago, a Republican senator ran for President (he didn’t make it through the primaries) whose listening skills were described by one observer this way: “For most people, the opposite of speaking is listening. For Senator ---, the opposite of speaking is waiting.”

That senator -- indeed, just about all of our politicians -- could benefit greatly from using Cracking the Code’s “NIQCL” (pronounced “nickel”) a probing technique that helps you understand how others see a situation, problem or opportunity. You probe to learn the Need, the Importance, the Quantification (determining the size or scope), the Consequences, and then, finally, you Look/Listen to understand all possible solutions and/or options.

The myth that a good leader is first and foremost a good talker was put to rest long ago. As so many have written, good listening is the single most important leadership skill. But what Cracking the Code does so well is show us just what good listening is — and how we can make ourselves better listeners. It stresses the importance of face-to-face communication, and the difference between “verbal clues” and “musical clues” -- the unspoken indicators — in trying to read the feelings of someone you’re trying to move to commitment, whether it’s a client or co-worker or family member.



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My business is based in Hawaii. Because of Asian cultural influences, communication customs are in some ways more subtle than in the continental U.S. In the early years, when we would sometimes hire salespeople new to the islands without explaining these subtle differences to them, basic misunderstandings could occur.

I remember a young salesperson who had moved to the islands from the East Coast. In her first week on the job, she returned to the office after a long day almost giddy in her excitement. She had made three sales in that single day, of several thousand dollars each. Later she learned that in fact she hadn't made a single sale, that she had actually been told "no" each time, only in a more oblique way than she had been used to hearing where she'd come from. She hadn't heard the "musical clues."

Cracking the Code would have been a huge help in training those new salespeople, not to mention in sparing us from having to learn so much over the years the hard way.