

Book Review: Mastering the Management Buckets: 20 Critical Competencies for Leading Your Business or Nonprofit

By Carrie Cavanaugh

Mastering the Management Buckets is a great introduction or refresher course on management. It would be a valuable asset to new managers and a great way to remind mature managers of all the elements they need to address. For although we all have our strengths, as Pearson points out, we need to master all 20 buckets in order to really do a good job of managing. Pearson describes his book thus: “It won’t solve all your management challenges – no book will. Instead, it is a crash course in leadership and management. It’s more pragmatic than comprehensive. It’s part resource library, part filing system and part toolbox” (p. 19). I think this is an apt description, but what it leaves out is the personality and practical experience that Pearson brings to the pages.

Pearson is president of his own management consulting company, John Pearson Associates, Inc. He has had 30 years of experience as a CEO. It is this leadership experience at influential Christian organizations that has given him the background he needs to now help other Christian leaders.

Pearson’s book is basically a list of the 20 essential areas you need to master in order to be a great manager. For each of these 20 “buckets”, he describes the different “balls” that need to go in them in order to make them work. These practical suggestions are a great starting place for growth. Pearson has done a good job of addressing the spectrum of issues a manager is called to engage, from issues of community to how to run meetings.

Pearson explains that we have more than enough information available, but it is not always quality material. What we really need according to Pearson is “Wisdomopedia” (p. 78). He then devotes a whole chapter to the “critical competency” of reading quality books. In this chapter, not only does Pearson effectively laud the habit of reading, but also includes a list of book recommendations for each of the 3 categories of competencies – Cause, Community and Corporation. Additionally, each chapter of the book includes numerous reading suggestions. One surprising bit of advice was to delegate your reading to your staff.

One of the buckets I most enjoyed learning about was the “People” bucket. This bucket is about understanding both who you are and those you interact with. He focuses on the issue of communication styles, listing four “social styles”. True to his description of the book as a resource, he includes all the information you would need to determine someone’s social style as well as tips on how to best communicate with them. He also admits that he tries to appeal to all the social styles in this book, and I must say he wrote in a way that appealed to my social style.



My favorite bucket was the “Hoopla” bucket, which is “for celebration, recreation, intentional food and fellowship gatherings, and just plain fun.” The idea is that successes should be recognized, staff engaged as whole people and a healthy balance of hard work and relaxation exemplified. Pearson’s suggestions correlate with what other authors, such as Patrick Lencioni, are saying about the importance of genuinely caring for your employees. Pearson says this is so important that you need to budget money for it and appoint a staff member to make sure the office fun happens regularly.

I can’t help but point out one suggestion Pearson has regarding learning what your staff value: “Workplace Survey. Your supporting customers include your staff members. Participate in the annual Best Christian Places to Work survey and learn what your employees value most.” (p. 56) We are pretty proud to have made it onto Pearson’s list of helpful tools for leaders of Christian businesses and nonprofits.

Reading Mastering the Management Buckets feels more like sitting down with a mentor than it does reading another business book. Pearson obviously loves the challenge of management and he is brimming over with suggestions based on what he has learned through the years. He’s not so authoritarian as to dictate things down to the last detail, but instead as a motivating teacher, he gives you direction as to what areas you should further explore for yourself. This is a book I think every manager would gain from reading.