

ASK Bookshelf

Here is a description of a book that we believe will interest ASK readers.

***The Powers to Lead*, by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)**

Joseph Nye, who has served as chairman of the National Intelligence Council and Assistant Secretary of Defense as well as dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, has long been a proponent of "soft power"—the ability to get what you want by attraction, by co-opting rather than coercing others. That idea, along with Nye's recognition that both hard and soft power can play a role in achieving desired results, informs this brief, sensible, useful book on leadership.

Nye defines a leader as someone who "helps a group create and achieve shared goals." Implicit in that definition is his insistence that leadership is a *relationship*, both because leaders only exist in relation to followers and because success is more likely when goals and ways of working are shaped by leaders and followers together. Effective leaders have vision, communication skills, and emotional intelligence. This last quality includes a person's ability to master his or her own emotions and the empathy needed to understand and interact appropriately with others. Successful leaders also understand how the context of work influences the appropriateness of particular leadership strategies and styles. Leading in a crisis and leading a long development project may require different approaches—a different balance of hard and soft power, for instance, or more or less emphasis on inspiration or maintaining order.

While recognizing that hard and soft power both have value (he calls the combination of the two "smart power"), Nye emphasizes the value of soft power, perhaps because traditional ideas of leadership stress hard power, sometimes to the exclusion of any other kind. He admits that consultative leadership—soft-power asking and engaging—takes more time than issuing orders, but it has the advantage of giving leaders more information and gaining the commitment (not just the obedience) of followers.

Members of NASA project teams should find lots of useful insight in *The Powers to Lead*. The book gives project managers

and other "official" leaders an opportunity to analyze their own behavior as leaders, evaluate their effectiveness, and add to their repertoire of approaches for their varied and challenging work. But team members not normally identified as leaders will also find value here. For one thing, being an effective follower is being an essential contributor to the leadership relationship. Also, as Nye points out, leadership in groups tends to be somewhat fluid, with different people becoming leaders in different situations, whether or not their taking on that role is formally recognized. Finally, Nye makes an important point about what he calls "leader attribution error"—the tendency to give leaders more credit for accomplishment and more blame for failure than they deserve. We often imagine leaders have influence and knowledge far beyond what they actually possess. Understanding leaders' limitations and seeing them as one factor among many in getting work done can also contribute to success, including successful leadership. ●