This is a book that was, for me, at once vexing and enjoyable, irritating and refreshing. The author, James O’Toole, is a well known management theorist who ran the prestigious and pricey Aspen Institute. He is clearly well versed in the contemporary culture of business and an individual with no shortage of strong opinions. As an academic, I found his bold assertions, with no research to back them up, often difficult to accept at face value. However, because I agreed, at least in principle, with many of his views, I tended to be a bit more open to the world view he champions.

In O’Toole’s view, values based leadership, or moral leadership (he uses the terms interchangeably), means empowering everyone in the organization to be a leader. A strong, moral leader has “courage, authenticity, integrity, vision, passion, conviction and persistence. They listen to others, encourage dissenting opinion among their closest advisors, grant ample authority to subordinates and lead by example rather than by power, manipulation or coercion”.

The counter-point to moral leadership is what O’Toole lumps together under a banner of contingency leadership. For his “bad example” counter-point, he uses situational and contingency leadership interchangeably and here is one major area where I strongly disagree with him. He defines situational/contingency leadership as “doing whatever it takes to be successful”. This “ends justify the means” notion is not one I necessarily associate with a situational leadership style. Rather, I see a person who successfully employs a situational leadership approach as having a large tool box with different skills that he/she can draw upon as the moment requires.

O’Toole adamantly rejects this concept and asserts that there are certain fixed standards of comportment and human interaction from which one may not drift, if one wants to be a moral leader. Indeed, he asserts that a moral leader can overcome a “chronic and inevitable pattern of resistance to change in only one way: By building an alternative system of belief and allowing others to adopt it as their own”.

Early in the book O’Toole says that the lowest form of intellectual discourse is to challenge the validity of an example used to illustrate a general proposition. Yet, with no hint of irony, this is just what he does as he walks through a variety of leadership approaches (command, manipulation, shepherding), and rejects each.

As noted, some of these inconsistencies are vexing, yet by and large, I agree with many of his fundamental thoughts, mainly that leadership isn’t so much what you do, but the way you are. I found this to be an especially relevant book as a County Extension Director where one has a good deal of responsibility but very little positional power. In my particular case, I can’t require very much of my colleagues. If I want to build a commitment to a shared vision for our county, I have to respect the process for articulating that vision, and then I need to live that vision and hope that others feel a commitment to that vision meets both their personal and professional goals. But it isn’t me allowing others to adopt that vision. That is far too paternalistic a notion, but I get the sense that O’Toole is comfortable being the Big Daddy.