This book tackles head-on the issue of leadership that is not fit for purpose. In this respect it is different from most books about leadership in two ways. First, it focuses on leadership and value. Most books about leadership, unless explicitly about the ethics of leadership, focus on giving an account of a leadership paradigm which is given the weight of scientific theory. The question of leadership and purpose, and with that value and identity, gets little house room. Second, it acknowledges that, for whatever reason, leadership can mislead. The authors offer four categories of this misleadership, examined in detail in the first five chapters, involving leadership that is missing, misguided, misinformed and Machiavellian. In the first, there is an absence of leadership. This may extend throughout the organization, as the case of the Titanic shows. In the second, there is an absence of reflection about purpose, leading to teleopathic leadership (focused on the wrong objectives). In one sense this reflects the Aristotelian stress on phronesis, the capacity to reflect about purpose (telos), and to embody it in practice. The idea of purpose allows the authors to introduce the concept of spirituality in relation to leadership, in the sense of developing a culture of significant meaning. The third category involves leaders who are unaware of necessary information, stakeholders or skills. This is illustrated in the credit crisis, with leaders who were simply unaware not simply of the context and consequences of their practice, but even of the simple nature of the financial instruments used to make money. The final category involves deliberate misleading of the workforce and others for personal objectives. The case used to illustrate this is that of Nestlé and breast milk substitute.

The remaining three chapters develop a view of globally fit leadership that can begin to counter the examples of misleadership. This idea of globally fit leadership is an important one, suggesting a continuum from what the authors term diabolical leadership, through to globally fit leadership, based in effective decision making, global perspectives and a new paradigm. The model stresses elements of holistic and virtue approaches, stressing the need for greater awareness of the global environment, and the need to work towards this. This is not an approach to globally responsible leadership that can be ‘simply’ followed. It has to be learned through practice, again echoing Aristotle.

My one criticism of the book concerns the fourth category of misleadership, Machiavellianism. Machiavelli has a bad name, but studies of his work increasingly suggest that he does not simply focus on the leaders’ goals. On the contrary, he is strongly aware of the interdependence of leadership and followers. By extension, I would argue that the example of Nestlé in this category does not really hold water. The case in question suggests that Nestlé, far from being simply focused on the pure market ends,
developed strong partnerships with several stakeholders. Perhaps a more effective case would have been Enron, which precisely embodies deceit and the clear attempt to mislead, both around purpose and relevant data.

Nonetheless, I think the final category still holds, and along with the other categories of misleadership and the key idea of globally fit leadership, this book provides an important new perspective that effectively bridges theory, value and practice in leadership studies.