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Book Review by Brian Codd (as a requirement of 55209 Leadership Development)

of

*The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in
Organisations*

(Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. 1995, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco)

INTRODUCTION

In his foreword to the book *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner (1995), Tom Peters, author and international management consultant, suggests that the airport bookshelf test is a useful indicator of the longevity of management and leadership texts. In an era of fads, Peters contends that only a few texts stand the test of time with a 'couple of Drucker's' being among those. He refers to the works of prolific author and pioneer of management theory and practice, Peter F. Drucker.

Peter Drucker is a leader. Author of over 30 books spanning from the 1930s to the present time, he is attributed to being the innovator of the concepts of the 'knowledge society' and 'management by objectives', among numerous other insights.

In his *Business Masterminds* series, author Robert Heller explores the life and lessons of Peter Drucker. This paper critiques Heller's book from the perspective of what it provides in terms of leadership development, however, in essence, the paper explores the messages of Drucker himself.

DRUCKER: THE LEADER

Drucker was born in Vienna in 1909. His life thus far is, in itself, evidence of the globalisation of the modern world. Drucker was initially educated in Austria and Germany, and worked in Germany and London before emigrating to the United States in 1937, where he has lived since. Even in his eighties he continues to be a frequent traveller to Europe and Japan.

His many pursuits come under the labels of academic, teacher, journalist, consultant and socio-economic historian. His hostile rejection of fascism and his disillusionment with the de-humanised economics of John Maynard Keynes are indicators of Heller's (p. 7) description of Drucker as a humanitarian thinker who sees business, management and economics as aspects of social and political history.

LESSONS FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Drucker's life emphasises that leadership development is about learning different things from different leaders. Essentially, Drucker is an example of the conundrum that leadership can be learnt, but it may not be taught.

Drucker's intimate knowledge of management was initially developed from his time as vice-chairman of General Motors, where he worked under the leadership of Alfred P. Sloan (Heller, p. 10). Sloan was not, however, one of the three people that Drucker described as those he learnt the most from. It is a poignant indicator of the almost eclectic nature of acquiring wisdom that Drucker points to two of his early banker bosses, and his first newspaper editor, as those he won respect for (in Hasselbein & Cohen, 1999 pp. 3-7). Though described as mentors, they were not so in a formal sense. It is an exercise in self-reflection that Drucker recognises those people for what they were to his own development as a leader.

Drucker himself identified the following lessons he learnt from these mentors:

- treat people differently, based on their strengths;
- set high standards, but give people the freedom and responsibility to do their jobs;
- performance review must be honest exacting, and an integral part of the job;
- people learn the most when teaching others; and
- effective leaders earn respect — but they don't need to be liked.

Among the many who subscribe to the views of Drucker are Kousez and Posner (1995, p. 336) who advocate that leadership is an art for which the instrument is self and that leadership development is, ultimately, a process of self-development.

Drucker asserts that a leader must think about self-management (Heller, 2000, p. 36) and should be directed and controlled by performance objectives, rather than by a boss (Heller 2000, p. 54).

It is no surprise that among his many pursuits, Heller describes Drucker's appearances as a teacher at universities and management forums as his greatest contribution to generations of practising managers (p. 6). Even more recently, and within the context of management practice in Australia, teaching is seen as a key area of skill for all leaders (Enterprising Nation 1995, p. 41). Tichy (in Alter 1997) reinforces the place that teaching plays in leadership development by contending that 'the heart of leading is teaching'.

Heller describes Drucker's successes in terms of his wealth or experience, mixed with a 'unique blend of intellectual rigour, popularisation, practicality and deep understanding of crucial trends'. Drucker's understanding and interpretation of trends supports his demonstration of the leadership quality of being visionary. In 1969 he is attributed to being the first to recognise 'knowledge' as the economic commodity of the future, and that knowledge management and the role of the knowledge worker were the leadership challenges to be faced.

There are those who would argue that the rational 'management by objectives (MBO)' philosophy, also developed by Drucker, is an example of his structured systems approach to management and leadership which may not be flexible enough in an era of what Millett (1998) describes as chaos and complexity theory. It is evident that proponents of this view refer to

the highly arguable system of command and control that MBO became, rather than Drucker's original insight that management must set and have clear objectives (Heller 2000, p. 52).

Perhaps the most interesting contradiction about the pioneer of the concept of knowledge management and lifelong proponent of innovation is his own reluctance to personally embrace the information revolution. He still types out his own letters on a typewriter (Heller 2000, p. 11).

Kousez (p. 38) and Kelleher (p. 43) tell us that leadership is about being oneself (Hasselbein & Cohen 1999). If this is accurate then Drucker fits the bill. Heller tells us that from Vienna to New York and beyond, Drucker has continued to be an innovator. He has continued to be himself.

CONCLUSION

Essentially, leadership is about who you are, rather than what you do (Hasselbein & Cohen 1999, p.xii). Consequently, leadership development is about what a person becomes as a result of their wins and losses, their successes and failures, their experiences, their knowledge and their own personal and professional vision.

By any of these measures and in his nineties, Drucker continues to be a leadership development 'work in progress', not wholly as a result of the wisdom he portrays through his writings, but perhaps more poignantly through the example of his life as a teacher, communicator, innovator, humanitarian and theorist.

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