

08/09/00

Book Review by Beverley McNally

of

The Leadership Challenge

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

“If a general is ignorant of the principle of adaptability, he must not be trusted with a position of authority”

Sun Tzu

The initial reaction to this book was Wow!!! Finally a book on leadership that is clear, well written, easy to read. The type of book that can be read in busy airport departure lounges during those inevitable delays that the target audience — that is, busy executives — encounter too often in the course of their working life. And inevitability, that ensures that all astute executives have something stashed in their brief case to ‘get on with’. Therefore, *The Leadership Challenge* must compete with cell-phones, the compulsory board reports, agendas and other such demands. This it does admirably. The reviewer, forced into just such a situation (a six hour fog delay), found it ideal company — not necessarily the most perfect, but certainly ideal.

Readability, commonsense and practicality are Kouzes & Posners’s strengths, both in *The Leadership Challenge* and their other major work *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It* (1993). Both books provide valuable resources for leaders, at all levels, within many different types of organisations. Unlike other books that concentrate on expounding a particular leadership philosophy, *The Leadership Challenge* contains interesting examples of how real life people went about dealing with situations. Moreover, it contains tools for teachers and lecturers to use (with the appropriate credit, of course) when they are facilitating seminars on leadership.

Furthermore, *The Leadership Challenge* is one of the few books published during this period that was not advocating some new hot leadership fad (Brown 1996). Kouzes and Posner have based their work upon the Leadership Practices Inventory that they have administered to over 60,000 managers in both profit and non-profit organisations within the USA and over 250,000 others worldwide. Therefore, the data obtained provides the authors with an advantage over other authors. Kouzes and Posner have developed five practices, each with two underlying principles, which combine to make up *The Leadership Challenge*.

<i>Ten Commitments of Leadership</i>	
Challenging the Process	<i>Search out</i> challenging opportunities to change, grow, innovate and improve <i>Experiment</i> , take risks and learn from the accompanying mistakes
Inspiring a Shared Vision	<i>Envision</i> an uplifting and ennobling future <i>Enlist</i> others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests hopes and dreams
Enabling Others to Act	<i>Foster</i> collaboration by promoting co-operative goals and building trust <i>Strengthen</i> people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competence, assigning critical tasks and offering visible support
Modelling the Way	<i>Set</i> the example by behaving in ways that are consistent with shared values <i>Achieve</i> small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment
Encouraging the Heart	<i>Recognise</i> individual contribution to the success of every project <i>Celebrate</i> team accomplishments regularly

However, what is of concern, is that *The Leadership Challenge* deals with the ‘now’. While the book talks of envisioning the future, it does not specifically address the competencies that leaders are going to require in the 21st century. For example, Walker (2000) makes the point that while much has been written about leadership development and competence, there is a noticeable absence of an appreciation of the concept of e-leadership — how leaders are going to be developed and lead in the new economies of e-business, rather than in the old economies of the IBMs and General Electric. In the e-world, there are leadership capabilities that will be required in order to provide e-business companies a sustained advantage over their old-economy and new start-up competitors. Evidence sourced from the recruitment industry and reported in *Machine Design* (July 20 2000), suggests that top-quality leadership is the most important difference between winning and losing companies in the e-world.

Nor is there any mention of the ability of leaders to lead in the global economy. Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989), Adler and Bartholomew (1992), Rothwell (1992), Antal (1993), Phillips (1993), and Allard (1995), believe that to succeed in the global operating environment of the 21st century, managers must be able to sense and interpret the complex and dynamic environmental changes. They must be able to develop and integrate the multiple strategic capabilities, yet at the same time, build and manage the complicated, yet subtle, new organisations required to link these sensing and response capabilities and deliver co-ordinated action on a worldwide basis.

For example Adler & Bartholomew (1992) developed a set of transnational competencies that leaders are going to require in order for them to lead effectively in the global environment.

<i>Skills of the Transnational Manager</i>		
<i>Transnational Skills</i>	<i>Transnationally Competent Managers</i>	<i>Traditional International Managers</i>
Global Perspective	Understand world-wide business environment from a global perspective	Focus on a single foreign country and on managing relationships between headquarters and that country
Local Responsiveness	Learn about many cultures	Become an expert on one culture
Synergistic Learning	Work with and learn from people from many cultures simultaneously Create a culturally synergistic organisational environment	Work with and coach people in each foreign culture separately or sequentially Integrate foreigners into the headquarters national culture.
Transition and adaptation	Adapt to living in many foreign cultures	Adapt to living in a foreign culture
Cross-Cultural Interaction	Use cross cultural interaction skills on a daily basis throughout one's career.	Use cross-cultural interaction skills primarily on foreign assignments
Collaboration	Interact with foreign colleagues as equals	Interact within clearly defined hierarchies of structural and cultural dominance.
Foreign Experience	Transpatriation for career and organisation development	Expatriation or inpatriation primarily to get the job done

Source: Adler & Bartholomew (1992) Managing Globally Competent People. *Academy of Management Executive* 6 (3) August

Lobel (1990), Gregersen, Morrison & Black (1998), McNally and Parry (2000), and Mass (2000) outlined the need for a broader set of competencies in the global economy. These include, among others, a curiosity and openness toward other ways of living and speaking, and a non-judgmental acceptance of cultural differences. In particular, managers require competence in languages and wide-ranging experience across many cultures.

Gregersen et al (1998) made the point that unlike Magellan and Cook, whose world — once charted — was reasonably static: today's world, particularly the business world, is constantly shifting and growing at an exponential rate. Gregersen et al (1998 p. 21) went on to comment that, consequently, the leaders of today are explorers guided by only the faintest glimmer of 'unfamiliar stars'.

Van Houten (1989) asks how can we prepare for the functions we are going to need in ten years from now when we cannot, with any assurance, describe what these will be?

To add to the complexity of the leadership debate, Andrew Campbell, in Caulkin (1993), believed that all the research adds up to a profound recognition that leaders have followers, and where there are followers there are leaders. But since we cannot tell which creates the other, it is very difficult to know which levers to pull. *The Leadership Challenge* does not discuss how the followers are going to change in the future. As stated on p 2.11 of the Leadership Development Study Guide, one view is that 'the only definition of a leader is someone who has followers'. Therefore, failure to deal with the changing nature of 'the followers' could be considered another weakness of the book. The increasing participation of women in the workforce, increased birth rates amongst indigenous peoples and globalisation are resulting in an increasingly diverse workforce. It is important that any author writing in the leadership arena considers these issues in some depth. Failure to develop leaders who are able to adapt and change to meet the challenges presented by a diverse workforce will only lead to organisations being less than successful.

The Leadership Challenge is a delight to read and contains many delightful lessons. Surveys show that there is an ever-widening gap between 'those at the top and those who are following' (Brown (1996)). Kouzes and Posner themselves asked 'why then are leaders not taking up the challenge to learn to become leaders in the true sense of the word, not just in name only'. Maybe then it is unreasonable to criticise Kouzes and Posner for not looking to the future when there is evidence that the 'now' is not being taken care of.

Brown (1996) and Thoms (1996), in an attempt to answer the doubts raised by Kouzes and Posner with regard to the ever-widening gap between leaders and followers, asked 'can leadership be learned from a book?' How much can a book develop true leadership skills and how many readers of *The Leadership Challenge* will go on to be great leaders? So while the book has provided many insights and a vision of leadership that is worth taking time to consider and reflect upon, it must be recognised that there are gaps. Yet, at the same time, these gaps do not detract from the work itself and the value and support it provides to those taking the first step upon what, at times, can be a very lonely leadership journey. For these reasons alone, it should be included as part of any leadership reading list.

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