

HRD Forum: Book Review

**Keeping Sight of the ‘Ship’?
Recent Publications Addressing Leadership
and Leadership Development**

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Leadership-As-Practice: Theory and Application

Joseph Raelin (Ed)

Routledge, 2016, ISBN 9781138924864

Transpersonal Leadership Series; White Papers One, Two and Three

Routledge in partnership with Leadership Global, 2016

Last year I taught a Master’s programme on Leadership and Change Management in both Malawi and Swaziland. I was struck by how difficult it was to get the students to think about and embrace ideas about leadership that did not sit firmly within a view that leadership is about ‘great men’ (and sometimes women!), ‘heroes’ and the ‘traits’ of particular individuals — usually in very senior organisational positions. This book goes some way to helping me make sense of this difficulty. It introduces the “leadership-as-practice” (L-A-P) movement which Raelin claims will “shake the foundations of the very meaning of leadership” in the worlds of theory and practice. A bold claim but as you begin to wrestle with the idea you can begin to see why. Its essence is its conception of leadership as occurring as a practice rather than residing in the traits or behaviours of particular individuals. Leadership-as-practice is less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together. It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience. I recall my students being particularly engaged with a case study focusing on Michael O’Leary as CEO of the Irish based budget airline RyanAir. But, if leadership is understood as residing in individuals, with a bundle of ‘superior’ competencies and if these assumptions are deeply rooted, then no wonder this alternative way of thinking about leadership is challenging. And despite well-meaning textbooks which include sections on topics such as shared leadership, distributed and relational leadership, it is the Michael O’Leary’s of this world that steal the show. Herein lies the problem — at least for those of us in the HRD community engaged at the ‘sharp end’ of leadership development in practice, often constrained by the explicit demands of the curriculum or the expressed wishes of an organisational client.

The book is a collection of papers with Joe Raelin providing an excellent editorial ‘scene setting’. It is not an easy read. I shudder to think what my African students would have made of it. This said, perseverance pays dividends. Over and above the attention to the background of L-A-P, which provides the basis for the necessary re-orientation, the contributors to this book deal with the relationships and implications in areas such as the politics of leadership, identity and the critically important ‘pandora’s box’ of social interactions. One section focuses specifically on

leadership-as-practice development (LaPD) and it is on this section that I devoted particular attention. Denyer and James are critical of traditional leader development and present the thinking that underpins an alternative where leadership is “co-constructed through acts, activities and interactions within the situation in which it takes place”. I liked their notion of ‘collaborative leadership learning groups’ (GCLGs). “Whereas action learning groups tend to focus primarily on the organizational challenge, in GCLGs the focus is on learning about collaboration and shared leadership practices”. Importantly, the authors provide interesting examples. Furthermore, they warn of traps that can befall development initiatives which claims to address LaPD. It is not a question, they argue, of deliberately adopting a particular leader style. Indeed, LaPD may well necessitate addressing tensions between expectations held by clients and learner about desirable traits, style and competencies; the very tensions I encountered with students in Southern Africa. Befitting the overall approach attention in leadership development needs to be given to the day-to-day practice of leadership and where much activity may be unspoken or unconscious. There is also a need to study instances of failure, dissonance, crisis, obstruction and even surprise that spur leadership practice interventions.

Overall, the book provides a rich alternative to traditional views on leadership and leadership development.

Developing Ethical Leaders by John Knights is the first of a series of White Papers launched by Routledge in association with Leadership Global¹ around the subject of transpersonal leadership. It appears, at first blush, to share some similar ground to Raelin’s book on Leadership-as-Practice. Knights argues: “Leadership is becoming more distributed, more informal, more shared”. In this context, on the one hand the role of senior ethical leaders is pivotal and on the other, every single employee should be thinking of themselves as an ethical leader. This can only be achieved, Knights concludes, by creating an ethical culture. A key implication for Knights is that anyone can and should look to be a leader wherever they are in an organisation.

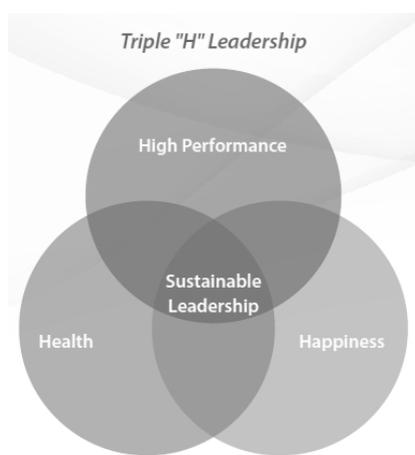
However, as Knights moves to address application and practice an uneasy tension re-appears vis more traditional perspectives on leader development. The paper seems to get bogged down with what a ‘transpersonal leader’ looks like — albeit with the twist of what competencies ethical leaders need. Even the name — ‘transpersonal’ leader — strikes me as mildly disconcerting. Who in their right mind would ever claim to being a transpersonal leader? It almost seems more appropriate for a superior AI inspired robot.

Importantly, for any claim that this White Paper is occupying similar ground to that of L-A-P, we need to see accounts of practice; everyday stories of leadership-as-practice. Stories and accounts which can then be used to illustrate how the ‘ship’ in leadership can be kept sight of and indeed hauled back into leadership development ... and with appropriate attention paid to the aspects of gender and ethics and democratisation of the workplace etc, etc. Their absence in this White Paper, and indeed more generally, acts as a constraint on the L-A-P ‘movement’ (Raelin). Such accounts are essential and indeed I could have benefitted with just one or two to support my teaching in Africa.

The second and third in the Routledge series are also now available to download. The second, **Women, Naturally Better Leaders for the 21st Century**, authored by Greg Young, takes a look at the reasons why we have a confluence of women playing a greater role on the world stage in the workplace and the reasons behind some of the cultural barriers that hitherto have kept them from achieving parity at the most senior levels. The paper argues that the areas where women emerge as stronger, e.g. developing others, are those required by leaders of organisations to be

most successful in the 21st century. A challenge remains, however, which is how best to get more women into leadership positions where they can deliver maximum advantage.

The third, **Sustainable Leadership: Re-wire Your Brain for Sustainable Success** (Sue Coyne), is described by Routledge's publicity as 'edgy' and 'at times uncomfortable'. I presume this to mean the arguments developed by Coyne that too many organisations are stuck with old and traditional mind-sets regarding leadership. Well, 'edgy' and 'uncomfortable' are not the words I would use but the legitimacy of Coyne's basic argument is sound and indeed resonates well with how I began this review. She advocates a shift to sustainable leadership and surprise surprise we end up with a neat model of what it looks like to be a 'high performing leader' in this context. This is captured in the author's conceptualisation of 'Triple H Leadership' (see Figure). Intrigued by being a 'happy leader'? then take a look at this White Paper for more details. Interestingly, Coyne asks 'is happiness something that is innate?'. Perhaps it is just me but doesn't this sound awfully familiar?



It seems then that by and large, in all three of these papers, we are drawn back to well-trodden territory. Interest in leadership-as- practice seems to get left far behind. Still, they are worth a look not least because for the time being they remain free to download at https://www.routledge.com/posts/9952?utm_source=Routledge&utm_medium=cms&utm_campaign=160801457

I suspect the book **Becoming a Transpersonal Leader**, when it is published in 2018, will carry a hefty price tag — so get them now for nothing while you can!

Note

1. Leadership Global offer consultancy and development services to organisations worldwide. They are made up of experienced former CEOs and Business Leaders and purport to show excellent understanding of the key issues faced at the most senior management and Board levels. They focus firmly on the practical “how to” of business leadership development and develop capability through coaching, mentoring and facilitation of individuals, groups and teams.