Capita Selecta

Book Review

_Leading with Spirit, Presence and Authenticity_

August 18, 2014

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Book Review

Leading with Spirit, Presence and Authenticity

The book starts with an introduction by Kathryn Goldman-Schuyler who explains her intention to write this book; “to nourish the capacity to be present” (p.15). In that same introduction she explains that leadership depends on widely networked interaction, despite leadership may look as if it comes from the person who is visible. As such, she stems for the complex and intricate interdependence of all the components leadership exists of. Based on aforementioned, Goldman-Schuyler is also motivated by the question “which of these can be influenced and optimally affective ways to do so” (p.18)? The author addresses two important perspectives that can be integrated into leadership education and development. The first perspective is ‘Embodied Learning’ and the second perspective is ‘Unending Unfoldment’.

She also presents the findings of her collaborative action research project to explore ‘presence’ in action. Instead of focusing on training, the author became interested in questioning, “whether simply ‘paying attention’ might trigger a different way of approaching life and action” (p.22). Based on her analysis about the experiences of the participants being present, a model, ‘embodied learning’, was developed. From the research the authors concluded “participants experienced unexpected insight and support for being present in daily action and felt that this affected how they worked during the rest of the day while they were involved in the experiment” (p.22).

The author suspects that “leaders do not need the depth of mindfulness training (…); they need only brief training in awareness and compassion, combined with ongoing practice in being present to themselves, others, and life while working (…)” (p.24). As such “when executives sense that they are interconnected with all other sentient beings, they are likely to make different decisions than when they mainly sense pressure for quarterly results (…)” (p.24).

What to expect
This book presents a wide variety of ideas and methodologies in leading with spirit, presence and authenticity (the theme of the book). The three concepts are seen as related and interdependent lenses through which to appreciate leadership. Each part consists of stories from researchers, managers and consultants about their work illustrating the discussed concept. Each chapter is a story on its own and reflects the theme proposed and the two important perspectives given by Goldman-Schuyler that can be integrated into leadership education and development, namely embodied learning and unending folding.
Part one: Spirit

Spirit; “could be thought of as the underlying principle of enlightenment – the source of all and everything” (p.27).

Karin Jironet questions, in her introduction to part one, what spirituality can do for leadership if it, “in its very fundament, clings to its old logic” (p.4). Because, she argues, the power developed from spirituality (e.g. mindfulness) is contrary to the power, as identified by Western theory, developed through leadership. Therefore, she concludes, the two will eventually collide and there is no conclusive response in the West today to this. This explains the importance of and is in line with the conclusions of the findings of Goldman Schuyler her research project. As such, this introduction builds on the books’ main introduction and makes the readers’ understanding evolve. So, this ensures that the theme is less difficult to comprehend, and thus except. Given aforementioned, the co-author asks for a different kind of leadership approach. In order to change the old logic in the concept leadership she poses that leaders today have ‘to let go’. “The challenge is not to succumb to the ego’s fear of losing power” (p. 7). I agree, because in today’s society it starts with letting go of the old underlying patterns, thoughts, values and norms we believe in, and looking at the world from a new perspective. In doing so, we can start building something new. In the following three chapters each author, from their point of view, addresses how to be and lead with spirit.

Chapter one describes the concept of spiritual leadership. The example of the CEO of Cipla, the second largest pharmaceutical company in India, shows how he dedicated himself to a higher purpose, inspired by role models who did the same. As such, he makes readers aware about how they can reach change by leading from our true purpose and bringing spiritual practices into business. This is followed by an interview with Otto Scharmer who argues that new leadership is needed that responds to the collective challenges that society faces on all levels; local, regional and global. He calls for “‘spiritual practices’ and using ‘presencing’ to listen deeply to one another and create holding spaces for dialogue across institutional boundaries so as to meet the challenges that companies and nation states urgently need to face” (p 11).

Chapter two focuses on the internal qualities of the self of the leader. The contributors state, “cultivating and enacting key forms of awareness-based interventions and encouraging practices of deep presencing are foundational to leadership development” (p.39). They gave examples how awareness-based technologies led to internalizing new patterns of behavior.

Chapter three consists of the work of two contributors who began to work together in Japan after the triple disaster – the biggest earthquake, a devastating tsunami and the explosion of the Fukushima Nuclear Energy Plant. The authors have used Enspirited Leadership to guide their work. They describe the use of stepping-stones that guided the Japanese people while recreating their lives, learning how to deal with uncertainty.

The three chapters describe, through examples and frameworks from the contributors own experiences, how spirituality can lead people to no longer cling to the old logic of power leadership as
well as how to lead from then on. As such, gradually the authors give readers the sense that there could be possibly a somehow conclusive response to the contradiction and the possible future absence of it. I found it an informative read, especially for those who are searching for new ways of leadership. Furthermore, I endorse the notion of ‘true’ listening is an important aspect for leaders because one that does not truly listen is not fully present. Only a true listener knows what is happening around him or her and can anticipate on the situation that occurs, being pro-active instead of reactive.

**Part two: Presence**

*Presence;* “how this enlightenment connects with life through light” (p.27). So, it “addresses the process of bringing this view into the world of human action” (p. 28). “This part contains programs for bringing mindfulness into educational systems.” (p.28).

In the introduction to part 2 the author questions the way mindfulness, i.e. as a business tool, is presented within organizations. According to him we need to have a better understanding of mindfulness because we need a shift in mind-set towards one that benefits all sentient beings. I agree, because understanding karma would make the world a better place to live in. The author concludes the chapters in part 2 clearly show mindfulness is essential in leadership education. I agree, as change of mind-set starts with the individual and education fosters change.

Chapter four describes, through real life stories, the definition of and reason for, certain values to be found fundamental by a group of leadership program teachers. With two examples they show how they try to support living into these values. Although this chapter is meant to explore how mindfulness (i.e. mindfulness as understood by J.E. Baugher) is brought into an educational program, it leaves the reader with the question if the stated mindfulness here is that of one which is meant to lead to “action that increasingly serves the whole” (p. 11) (“The direction the contributors hope leadership will take in the world” (p. 28)). As it remains unclear if it is aimed at understanding the true nature of the mind and all phenomena, as such benefitting all sentient beings. However, the applications discussed relate to mindfulness practices in Buddhism.

Chapter five entails about the difficulties one can meet when implementing mindfulness into demanding MBA’s. An informative read, especially for those who (start to) teach mindfulness within a leadership program. Although in this case most of the students considered mindfulness to add value, it remains not totally clear to what extent the mindfulness taught led towards “action that increasingly serves the whole” (p. 11). As quotes remain limited to “our meetings are so much more creative now” (p. 116) and “but I can see now that if I can’t look with clarity at a raisin, what am I missing everywhere else?” (p. 116).

Chapter six highlights the positive outcome mindfulness has on self-reflection and as such on the cultivation of social responsibility and thus on relationships. It is a coherent story of the benefit of mindfulness to the building of relationships and as such to social change. It offers concrete insight into the implementation of one part of mindfulness into an educational program.
However, what probably, for leaders not familiar with the subject, remains well less to grasp from the elaboration is how leaders lead with presence. Readers can restrict themselves to reading the excellent introduction to this part of the book. Nonetheless, those who want real life examples of mindfulness, benefitting relationships can read on, as its focus is on this part of individual mindfulness.

**Part three: Authenticity**

*Authenticity; “how it manifests in beings who take action”* (p. 27). Authenticity refers to “moving beyond trying to be present but really just pretending, to being able to genuinely live values that serve all participants in a given system” (p.28).

The last part of the book is devoted to authenticity in which Lena Lid-Falkman questions how it is possible to come further beyond appearing into being authentic, in a new global social world with its new technologies that affect leadership and rhetoric. Goldman Schuyler states in the introduction of the book “authenticity refers to moving beyond trying to be present (but really just pretending), to being able to genuinely live values that serve all participants in a given system” (p. 28). So, in part three, different stories illustrate different ways to be and live authentic leadership.

Chapter seven, compares servant-leadership with African leadership and its usefulness for building online learning communities. The contributors question what role values play in various types of institutions and what role they play in leadership. As such, the contributors explain that values are influenced by, among other, national cultures. In both value systems the core values are commitment to people’s growth and building community, with an emphasis on the follower. As such, “perhaps paradoxically, it can increase the authenticity of the leader” (Lid-Falkman, 2014, p. 153).

Chapter eight, discusses the importance of self-reflection in relation to authenticity. The contributor proposes a model that develops the intrapersonal aspect of authentic leadership in which she suggests that self-reflection and, on a deeper level, mindfulness are needed to develop authentic leadership. It consists of three elements: self-awareness, self-reflection and mindfulness. According to her the leader’s ability to be self-reflective and mindful helps encourage greater authenticity.

Chapter nine, provides insights on acting techniques to non-actors who wish to communicate leadership authentically. The contributor proposes that the development of strong self-awareness and the application of internal and external theater techniques can contribute to the embodiment of authentic leadership in the same way that they contribute to the development of truthful and authentic performances on stage. The contributor argues that leaders need to look for values in their own life stories and make them explicit so that they can share them with their followers. The leader who wishes to inspire others must know herself so that she can draw on her own experiences, emotions, and thoughts, also called method acting.

Chapter ten, asks the question what a leader’s lived experience of authentic moments are. As such, the contributor focused on leaders’ lived experiences of authentic leadership moments in the
complex, unfolding reality of the workplace. The goal of the research was “to help leaders become more aware of the potential of the moments in their own lives and recognize when they are taking place, so that they can engage more genuinely, skillfully, and effectively in a variety of complex emergent situations as such letting go defensive patterns” (p.214).

I found it again an informative read, especially for those who engage in leadership styles that incorporate the notion of authenticity, as is the case with, for example, servant-leadership. However, although the careful reader, with deep knowledge of theoretical and practical leadership, will immediately see the logic behind the structure of (this part of) the book as well as find the stories that illustrate the different views, teachings and practices of ((spirituality in (i.e. mindfulness in)) leadership and the metaphor’s drawn up on, clarifying, I did not always found so. Therefore readers should be prepared to pause, reread and give some serious thought to a number of passages before coming to an understanding of what is contained within them. Nonetheless, the book persuades the reader to endorse the direction the author’s hope leadership will take in the world. To conclude with, the system has to change, to do so simply paying attention can be a good step in the right direction. As it is all about unlocking a persons’ potential to see the true nature of mind and phenomena. We all have this capacity, however not everybody is aware of that.