



Book Review: Peter G. Northouse's (2009) *Introduction to Leadership: Concepts and Practices*

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For more than 20 years, students have relied on Peter G. Northouse for expertise and scholarly acumen in the dynamic discipline of leadership studies. Writing now to students and leaders in every profession and at every stage of development, Northouse (2009) makes the complexities of leadership theory practical and applicable to everyone in an interactive and engaging format.

In *Introduction to Leadership: Concepts and Practice*, Peter G. Northouse (2009) embarks on a mission to lift the veil surrounding the complexities and nuances of leadership, making them more understandable and accessible to leadership students and practitioners. Northouse, a professor of communication at Western Michigan University, is highly esteemed for his work in leadership studies and communications. As both an academician and consultant he has explored the art and science of leadership for more than 20 years and is perhaps best-known for his seminal work, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (1997), a theory-rich textbook designed and written for undergraduate and graduate students, currently in its fourth edition.

In response to the needs of a different audience, Northouse now turns his attention from the theoretical to the practical by providing instruction on the “how-to’s” of leadership. It is impossible, of course, to completely divorce the two and maintain the integrity of the discipline, and Northouse clearly attempts to provide enough theory to support the methods he introduces so that the reader is not left with the misperception that leadership is a shallow discipline whose full essence and effects can be realized merely by following step-by-step instructions.

The book is organized into ten interactive chapters, each devoted to one aspect of leadership practice. The chapters include questionnaires, observational exercises, and reflection and action worksheets designed to guide the reader through personal exploration of each topic. The reader is encouraged to engage in some of the activities prior to reading each chapter, and this technique would certainly be helpful to newcomers to the field.

Highlights

Northouse begins with the challenge of defining leadership in chapter 1. Five common definitions are provided along with a list of “Universal Leadership Attributes.” Northouse’s stated position is that leadership is an amalgam of all five definitions and is, indeed, demonstrated in those universal attributes. He also clarifies that the purpose of leadership is to create “change for the greater good” (p. 5).

Chapter 2 illustrates various leadership traits by discussing the lives of eight “notable” leaders: George Washington, Harriet Tubman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Bill Gates, and Oprah Winfrey. Northouse posits that the careful study of these eight leaders reveals different leadership traits and styles that are recognized as key contributors to success. He also presents an overview of the results of studies conducted by social scientists related to effective leadership traits.

Venturing a bit deeper, the philosophy of leadership is addressed in chapter 3 and Douglas McGregor’s theory X and theory Y is used to illustrate how philosophy informs style. The research findings of Lewin, Lippitt, and White are then presented as the authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire styles are highlighted.

Northouse examines leadership behaviors and categorizes them into two groups: tasks and relationships, in chapter 4. Because the two are “inextricably tied together” (p. 8), he postulates that the effective leader will be highly competent in both areas and intuitive regarding the mix required in any situation. He presents a thinly cloaked view of Hersey and Blanchard’s situational leadership model to effectively explain the leader’s challenge of integrating task and relationship behaviors in appropriate requisite measure.

Just as leadership behaviors were categorized in chapter 4, chapter 5 presents three categories of leadership skills: administrative, interpersonal, and conceptual with explanation and examples of each. The chapter includes an instructive model illustrating how the three types of leadership skills coalesce in an integrated and effective leader. Concrete examples are provided and specific skills taught for each category. Emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and basic problem solving are among the core leadership skills addressed.

In chapter 6 the reader is introduced to the importance of vision in effective leadership. Characteristics of effective vision are presented along with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, “I Have a Dream” speech and John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address. Vision’s importance to transformational and charismatic leadership is noted but not explored.

The following chapter provides insight into the leader’s responsibility and role in creating a culture conducive to achieving the vision. To that end, group behaviors are discussed and several communication and feedback skills, including performance management, are presented. The chapter also includes a helpful table on providing constructive feedback.

Northouse then transitions into an exposé of some of the most common leadership challenges by devoting chapter 8 to the matter of “out-group members.” Here he illustrates the leader-member exchange theory (LMX) and provides specific behaviors leaders can adopt to prevent and/or remedy out-group issues and their deleterious effect on organizational life.

Chapter 9, “Overcoming Obstacles,” gives the reader insight into seven additional barriers to leading effectively including ill-defined goals and/or directions, poor motivation, and unsuitable tasks. Path-goal leadership theory is presented and explained.

In the final chapter, “Addressing Ethics in Leadership,” Northouse tackles the complex concepts of ethics, character, and values. Using the Josephson Institute’s character model, he

explains how the leader's ethics direct his actions. The five bases of power are included in the discussion on power's effect on ethics. Values are described as "ideas, beliefs, and modes of action that people find worthwhile or desirable" (p. 167). According to Northouse, people rarely hold the same values.

Observations

Given the depth and breadth of leadership as a discipline, the voluminous literature, and the expressed purpose of this book, there were likely many difficult decisions about which concepts could be excluded while still providing an accurate and complete overview. I imagine the exercise to be as unwieldy as attempting to write a calculus book for first graders. Still, there were a few notable exclusions that would have enriched the reader's understanding and appreciation of leadership.

For example, in chapter 1, Northouse notes that leadership is about change yet pertinent information regarding change theory, change management, or the concept of leader as change agent is strikingly absent from the book. Instead, change is mentioned in the discussions about conflict management (chapter 5) and vision (chapter 6) as part of the framework for those topics. The new student of leadership, as well as the leader-in-training, would benefit from even the most cursory presentation of change management concepts and tools, however. For example, Kurt Lewin's (1936) force-field analysis tool for planning and implementing change along with his classic change model: unfreeze, change, and refreeze, come quickly to mind as does John Kotter's (1999) 8-stage process. All are practical leadership constructs that are easily understood and applied.

It is also interesting to note that only one philosophy of leadership, theory X and theory Y, is presented in chapter 3, and its roots are embedded in modernist thinking during an era when the majority of jobs were industrially-based. We now find ourselves in the knowledge age, however, which requires a new philosophy of leading. In light of the evolution of leadership theory and practice since the early 1960s when Douglas McGregor advanced theory X and theory Y, the exclusion of contemporary transformational leadership theories (Bass, 1998; Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1999; Greenleaf, 1991; Yammarino & Avolio, 2002) from the conversation about leadership philosophy was a surprising and disappointing omission.

The choice to exclude these important developments becomes even more curious when, in chapter 10, Northouse defines ethical leadership as "a process by which a good person rightly influences others to accomplish a common good: to make the world better, fairer, and more humane" (p. 158) which is a hallmark of transformational leaders. Northouse does reference James MacGregor Burns' work in delineating ethical, modal, and end values, however (p. 167).

Finally, the values discussion in chapter 10 would have been more meaningful had it included an explanation of how values are formed. Northouse's assertion that values can be learned is overly simplistic because "values are simultaneously components of psychological processes, of social interaction, and of cultural patterning and storage" (Rokeach, 1979, p. 17). Further, empirical data suggests a finite number of values so that individuals hold the same values but prioritize them differently (Rokeach). This is of vital importance because the leader's challenge is not achieving reconciliation for a number of conflicting values but partnering with followers to identify shared values, facilitating understanding of individual and organizational values' hierarchies, and creating alignment.

Overall, however, the book accomplishes its intended purpose for its ideal audience by providing practical suggestions on becoming a better leader. A wealth of information is presented in an unassuming style that should appeal to both students and practitioners. Northouse's artful integration of real leaders' stories into each chapter illustrates key concepts, further enabling the audience to more readily identify with them. Written in laymen's terms, it is easy to follow and engages the reader in a reflective practice of leadership, a skill that alone is worth the cover price. The book should appeal to students in introductory leadership courses in any academic discipline as well as to anyone embarking on a new leadership journey.

About the Author

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