



## **BOOK REVIEW: MITCH McCRIMMON'S (2006) *BURN! 7 LEADERSHIP MYTHS IN ASHES***

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Dr. Norbutus found the ideas in *BURN!* consistent with both the emerging understanding of non-positional emergent leadership and her considerable experience in organizational change efforts (Norbutus, 2007). She presents a pragmatic argument for defining leadership as simply voicing an ethical, moral change idea—making leadership an option for everyone.

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**Y**ou might think a book written in 2006 would be outdated, but not so with *Burn! 7 Leadership Myths in Ashes*. Mitch McCrimmon argues convincingly for a unique definition of leadership—one that empowers everyone and reinstates the much maligned field of management. If leaders provide new ideas and challenge the status quo, anyone can do it. Implementation becomes a management function. The implications of this approach are far reaching and empowering. No longer must we wait for someone's permission, education, or training to be a leader—It is in us already waiting to be voiced.

### **Highlights**

As many of us remember, management took a big hit in the 80s as an American scapegoat to Japanese business success. Since management was considered to be bad, much of what needed to be done in organizations was then pushed under the umbrella designation of leadership and handed off to those in a position of authority. In *Burn! 7 Leadership Myths in Ashes*, McCrimmon (2006) provides the rationale to rethink the consequences of these earlier decisions, consider a new definition of leadership, and identify the ramifications for all manner

of things—from organizational innovation to leadership development programs. It is a whirlwind tour in a tight informative package that packs a real punch.

To give credence to his perspective, McCrimmon looks at outsiders: Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela. Each changed their societies—King in the United States, Gandhi in India, and Mandela in South Africa. None of these men had a position in the institution they impacted, so McCrimmon argues that these men demonstrated leadership by having both an idea for meaningful change and the courage to voice it. That is all it takes to be a leader. Leadership is not a role or a position, and does not need to be taught. These are just some of the many myths that McCrimmon dispels.

Key insights from this perspective include:

- *Leadership is not about taking charge of people.* King, Gandhi, and Mandela were not in charge of anyone—they had no position of authority—yet they changed societies. However, someone does need to be in charge to have decision making authority, allocate resources, etc.—That person would be designated as a manager.
- *Leaders and managers can both be transformational or transactional.* These are terms which define styles of influence. For example, Jim Collins (2001), in *Good to Great*, found that exemplary executives were quiet, collaborative, and determined. Leadership is independent of style—how the idea is communicated is immaterial.
- *Leadership is not a set of skills which people need to develop.* If you have an idea and the courage to express it, you are, during that process, a leader. As McCrimmon (2006) noted, “Courage is neither learned nor a skill” (p. 3). Skill building is for managers, executives, and supervisors in order for them to be effective and efficient at supervising people and business processes.
- *Leadership does not involve emotional intelligence.* This explains why we see people such as Winston Churchill as great leaders even when they demonstrate an abrasive style. From McCrimmon’s view, Churchill was a leader when he warned of Nazi Germany and encouraged the mobilization of troops even though no one wanted to listen to what he was saying.
- *Leaders and managers each have their place within an organization.* Managers should not be replaced by leaders. Leaders voice their ideas and promote new directions, while managers implement ideas and maintain the effective and efficient running of the organization. Both are essential and they can, of course, be one person doing different things at different times.
- *Leaders do not necessarily need to work closely with followers.* King, Gandhi, and Mandela did not work directly with the governments they were trying to influence. These, as well as many others alive and dead, are still influencing others without any direct contact. Managers, on the other hand, do need to work closely with followers.
- *It is not the responsibility of leaders to soothe anxieties.* By McCrimmon’s definition, leaders promote change and are therefore the creators of anxiety, not the soothers of it. Managers are the ones who should be expected to act in a paternalistic way.

McCrimmon (2006) returns the prestige of management to complement his view of leadership. Management is brought “back from the dead as a supportive, empowering, facilitative and inspiring function to take the lion’s share of moving people from A to B” (p. 7). He points out that the confusion between leadership and management has led to a focalization of leadership theory.

Because this view of leadership is sharply focused on having something to say and the courage to say it, many of the activities engaged in by executives are not focused on leadership, but on management. In addition, leadership, like creativity, cannot be developed, it can only be encouraged.

Having dealt with the fundamentals of this view of leadership, McCrimmon continues by challenging specific aspects of the leadership literature such as Kouzes and Posner's, *The Leadership Challenge*, because such authors assume people in authority positions are leaders regardless of whether or not they are actually leading anyone. The idea that women make better leaders is also challenged because women's heightened relationship skills would actually make them better managers and not necessarily better leaders. Risk taking, needed for McCrimmon's definition of leadership, is traditionally a more masculine trait, though certainly not limited to men. Women may be better equipped to create a more accessible message of change. Servant leadership is taken to task with McCrimmon noting the construct would be appropriate for managers whose function is to serve the public—especially in professional organizations. However, he, like Jacobs (2011), calls into question the appropriateness of trying to serve the needs of organizational members in all situations.

### Observations

This book is not for the faint of heart. McCrimmon's thesis is a challenging one for the multitudes steeped in the dominate paradigm of a person being called a leader because of the position held. As Yukl (2006) encouraged readers to consider, no longer is leadership just a dyadic one-way leader-follower relationship. McCrimmon has extended this line of reasoning to create a simple but powerful definition of leadership. The implications are significant and, in my mind, well worth the effort to consider.

For instance, leadership would be everyone's job—engaging others to consider innovative solutions and continuous quality improvements consistent with the notions of knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Managers would be freed from the overwhelming burden of being the only source of good ideas and could embrace their role of managing effective, efficient operations to include enabling leadership in others (Nielsen, 2004). It goes beyond empowerment to the intrinsic motivation possible for everyone (Pink, 2009).

McCrimmon invokes complexity as a reason everyone needs to be a leader. Much of his argumentation is consistent with Stacey's (2001, 2010) complex responsive processes of relating theory that uses complexity science as a metaphor for understanding human interaction. At the heart of Stacey's theory is an explanation of how we change and how we stay the same which provides the theoretical basis for leadership in all, also the heart of McCrimmon's message. Taken together, these two authors provide a powerful new way of understanding organizing and insights into high performance.

If there is a shortcoming of McCrimmon's thesis, it is that he does not merely downplay the moral and ethical aspects of leadership; he actually concludes it is not part of the leadership act. To him, leadership is about the idea for change, regardless of the moral and ethical implications of such change. However, I am in good company with Burns (1978), Ciulla (1998), and O'Toole (1995), among many others, who concluded that there must be a moral and ethical aspect to leadership, or it should not be called leadership—it would more appropriately be called miss-leading (James MacGregor Burns as cited in Ciulla, 1998).

Accommodating this concern would change McCrimmon's definition of leadership to someone who has a moral and ethical idea for change and the courage to voice it. McCrimmon had the courage to voice his paradigm-changing idea. His notions are liberating because, if we subscribe to his thesis, we no longer need to wait for someone with the title of leader—we can step up, be the leader, and start burning away the myths that bind us.

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