

JAY CONGER'S "LEARNING TO LEAD": A BOOK REVIEW

by John Davenport

The inherent qualities of leadership are often the topic of professional and academic debate. In his recent publication, *Learning to Lead: The Art of Transforming Managers Into Leaders*, author Jay Conger discusses this topic in depth. His intent is to argue that while many leadership qualities are inherent at birth many others can be developed while even the inherent ones require consistent nurturing. Conger relies on considerable leadership theory and research to support his thesis and most especially relies on established paradigms within leadership research such as leadership models (2005). Through the foundation of leadership models the author is able to support his pretext that leadership development strategies are equally if not more important than inherent leadership qualities are to the contemporary leader.

A majority of this text argues that leadership development is essentially part and parcel of post-modern leadership models. However, Conger refers to these types of leadership models as personal growth approaches which are based on, "critical elements in this order: (1) a resourceful state...(2) a relationship...(3) rapport...(4) rhythm...and (5) the result"(1992, p.75). While many of the underlying principles for establishing and building communications in an organization are universal, the approaches to leadership have taken many different tangents in the late 20th and early 21st century in order to raise productivity, to improve motivational response, and create

organizational culture in which communicative process as described by Conger are fostered. Thus, for Conger and other leadership authors, these post-modern leadership models are largely based on the willingness if not the responsibility to effectively guide and teach others (1992, p.46). One particularly interesting leadership model to emerge recently is situational leadership which occupies, in form or another, much of the underlying theme of Conger's work.

Situational leadership is not based purely on metrics but more on relationship with employees and how these relationships are fostered as well as how the employees are encouraged or facilitated in terms of development. Conger remarks that situational leadership training programs have, "been built around a contingency theory of leader effectiveness, using the two leadership roles...task and relationship"(1992, p.41). This leadership model supports many existing contentions that leaders are essentially teachers as well. While employees still must be held accountable for performance, the situational leader is concerned about the cultural effectiveness of the organization in ways Taylor and scientific management only discussed fleetingly. In this sense, where scientific managers call management a science, situational leaders call management and leadership an art and that acquiring this particular skill is akin to developing an innate talent rather than in honing managerial resource manipulation for

example. The art is in the development process that accompanies the progression of a leader through a career and an organization.

The body of literature covering leadership models often overlooks the impact that conceptual leadership models have had on current models. Conger, through his work on leadership development and delineating the qualities thereof vis-à-vis innate or induced qualities, addresses much of these shortcomings in leadership studies by delineating a 5 step leadership process which includes the following steps: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling other to act, modeling the way, and encouraging from the heart (1992, p.86). Yet, it is important to keep the paradigm of leadership in perspective by understanding its foundations in the simple desire to act and accomplish no matter the leadership model or structure being examined. This diacritical thread that extends across the leadership expanse of Conger's various models and their study, lends certain credibility to the office of leadership and its ultimate purpose in the 21st organization that relies more on transformational concepts and situational relationships. Leadership, no matter the ilk, is tasked itself with getting things done and this is an overriding theme of Conger's contribution to the literature. For Conger, he terms this progression as equivalent to a series of pithy statements that have been internalized by most leadership development programs to one degree or another: "take responsibility, live in the present, realize your potential"(1992, p.158). That is, leadership development must be planned rather than left to the auspices of professional experience alone and the leader must develop a sense of what these phrases

mean in daily practice. Perhaps it could be said that the field of leadership models, though discursive in its overall body of knowledge, can be unified around the consistent theme that each has been charged to identify unique and requisite skills deemed important within the environmental context in which each leadership model was developed and deployed. Conger's research illustrating the importance of planned development versus passive experience is an important contribution to leadership research relative to leadership models and how leaders can be groomed rather than simply discovered.

Many researchers have come to recognize that the leadership model most effective at adapting to the perpetual presence of change and the continual need to address professional and developmental needs of the individual employee is the transformational leadership model that has, as its core mission the idea of building cognitive and psychological skills which are hard to teach but almost impossible to do without (Conger, 1992, p.51).

Learning organizations, and by extension, transformational leaders, revolve around the establishment and maintenance of on-going processes that lead to continual improvement across the organization, not just productivity improvements in production or service. Conger says as much when he describes his authentic leadership development process as being at the core of transformational leadership itself and this concept is represented by what he describes as the definition of the creative leader:

The task of the creative leader is to envision and bring about changes which have beneficial long-term consequences not only for his or her part of the organization but for the organization as a

whole and the total society of which that organization is a part. (1992, p.115)

Thus, just as learning organizations are requisite for success, learning leaders, in a developmental sense, are requisite to lead those organizations within the context of the global business environment. This is essentially how Conger ends his work because he then focuses on how leaders should ideally be developed and trained which should result in a leader that could then match, to one extent or another, the

definition given above. Conger's work on leadership is useful and meaningful and certainly well intended but, unfortunately, it seems to lack resonance with pace at which many leaders are currently tasked with implementing and controlling change.

References

Conger, J. (1992). *Learning to lead: The art of transforming managers into leaders*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.