

Preskill S., & Brookfield, S.D. (2009). *Learning as a way of leading: Lessons from the struggle for social justice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reviewed by Mari Knuth-Bouracee

## **Introduction**

*Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*, by Stephen Preskill and Stephen D. Brookfield, explores the learning process in activists and social change leaders. The authors focus on “how leaders learn, how [leaders] support other people’s learning, and how all of this deepens [leaders’] social impact” (p. ix). The authors’ objective is to describe the significance and necessity of learning in leadership roles. In particular, Preskill and Brookfield address collaborative learning, a genuine interest in learning, and the integration of knowledge in the process of creating and enacting social change.

In order to demonstrate the concept of “learning as a way of leading,” the authors identified nine “learning tasks.” Each task, they explain, is a necessary aspect of inclusive, socially just leadership, and is described and deconstructed in a dedicated chapter. The authors also provide strategies to develop the learning task, potential obstacles to acquiring the learning task, and the potential problems associated with its practice. Each learning task is further illustrated through the example of specific leaders who exemplify the associated attributes and practices. The described leaders represent various types of diversity, ranging across time periods, social economic status, race, gender, and dedication to a variety of social issues.

This text provides a much-needed body of literature and research that explores leadership as a collaborative learning process through the lens of social justice. Until the 2000s, there seemed to be a void in the leadership literature, with little research focusing on the social impact of leadership development. Leaders and leadership styles, values, and concepts highlighted in this book provide an important paradigm shift. The authors argue that the culturally accepted ideals of leaders, who they are, and how leadership is defined may be too limiting. The proposed model of leadership development, in this text, does not restrict leadership to particular people, authorities, organizations, or structures. Instead, the authors suggest that any person within any organization, movement, or institution can be a leader.

## **Theoretical Framework**

*Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice* is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. Early in the text, the authors outline the different theories utilized in the work, which include: a) transformational leadership, b) symbiotic leadership, c) developmental leadership, d) servant leadership, and e) organic leadership.

Transformational leadership is a key framework for this book and model, with much drawn from Gregor Burn’s (1978) contributions to transformational leadership theory (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 7). Transformational leadership, the authors argue, represents the idea that leaders and followers are dynamic and always changing. Transformational leaders maintain a capacity to learn from their peers, while they “unite with followers to pursue...the common good,” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 7). Throughout the book the authors highlight leadership as a responsibility and right of every individual, making transformational leadership an ideal framework for this model.

Symbiotic leadership contends that the leader and follower engage in a reciprocal, interdependent relationship and that there is fluidity amongst leadership. This theory provides framework for learning tasks such as Supporting the Growth of Others, Collective Leadership, and Democracy. Similarly, developmental leadership, as described in the text *A Tradition That Has No Name* (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997), “quietly and self-effacingly develops the leadership potential in others...it targets the silenced and overlooked members of communities” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 8). The theory of organic leadership continues this line of thinking, maintaining that all members have something to contribute through the previous three theories.

Servant leadership is yet another theory that is in contrast with conventional notions of leadership. As described in the text, servant leadership helps to affirm the principles of common purpose through listening, learning, and engaging with and caring for others. The leadership theories that provide the framework for this text address a variety of concepts within leadership and leadership development. Most importantly, the theories share characteristics of common purpose, justice, and inclusion, all of which are central to the learning tasks described in the text.

### **Elements (Chapter Annotations)**

Chapter one serves as an important and necessary primer to the subsequent chapters. This chapter provides the theoretical framework, defines each learning tasks, elaborates on the organization of the book, and provides key definitions for understanding the text. This is particularly important for readers that do not have a background in the concepts of leadership development and, particularly, for student readers. In this chapter, the authors also very explicit state their pedagogy, values, and goals.

Chapter one also sets the tone and values of the book, particularly around social justice and shared learning and leadership. With the opening of the chapter, the authors immediately challenge the reader’s assumptions around leaders and leadership. The authors encourage the reader to deeply reflect on the messages received through cultural norms in regards to social identities, leadership, values, and more. The authors’ utilize an accessible approach and style that would resonate with anyone that has basic knowledge of social justice concepts.

Chapter two discusses the relationship between openness and leadership. As discussed in this book, openness is the “willingness to entertain a variety of alternative perspectives, be receptive to contributions from everyone regardless of previous attainments or current status, and create dialogic open spaces—multiple opportunities for diverse voices and opinions to be heard” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 21). In practice, openness involves curiosity, the desire to learn and know more, to acknowledge mistakes, and the ability and openness to change beliefs, thoughts, and assumptions. This chapter highlights Jane Addams, her work and experience, and the variety of ways in which she demonstrated openness.

In chapter three the authors describe critical reflection, a necessary practice in leadership which results in profound and acute self-exploration and evaluation. The authors emphasize deep reflection of values and, in particular, practices. With critical reflection it is imperative to be truly investigative and evaluative. The authors warn of superficial reflections or avoidance of uncomfortable topics particularly around power and privilege. This chapter highlights the authors’ commitment to social justice and the congruency between the values described and work towards social change.

Chapter four describes one of the purposes of leadership to include sustaining “the desire of people to go on contributing, as both leaders and followers, to everyone’s overall benefit”

(Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 61). The authors identify key practices towards supporting others including: a) listening, b) staying curious about others, c) asking constructive questions, d) listening to the stories of others, and e) championing others' goals. This chapter highlights the work of Septima Clark, a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, and her commitment to empowering and supporting the growth of others through the sharing of information and the creation of learning opportunities.

The fifth chapter focuses on collective leadership, which directly “challenges the individualized model of leadership” most typical in the United States' culture (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 83). Collective leadership is about engaging all group members in all aspects of the “process.” That is to say, facilitating meaningful opportunities for members to engage in development, dialogue, processing, gaining ownership, and responsibility for the groups' purpose. The authors once again make a connection between this learning task, previous chapters, and social justice ideals that enables readers to continue to challenge their own assumptions and Western values.

Chapter six suggests leaders must further complicate reflection, apply a critical lens to experiences, and allow and encourage change in thought and perspective. “Experience is ambiguous, multifaceted, and open to contradictory readings and interpretations” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 105). Thus, as leaders engage in learning, accumulate more knowledge and experience, their particular interpretation of knowledge, ideas, or values may change. The authors suggest that encouraged change in thought is essential. A leader that illustrates the learning task described in chapter six, Myles Horton, “famously observed that we don't automatically learn from experience...experiences don't teach us anything until we probe deeply into their meaning (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 105). The authors warn of several challenges that leaders analyzing their experience may encounter. Leaders who examine embarrassing, erroneous, or demoralizing experiences may become trapped in a process of blame. A key practice for helping to avoid this pitfall is to encourage others to tell their stories without interruptions or judgment.

In chapter seven, Preskill and Brookfield define “questioning” as a foundational leadership skill that will lead group members on a journey “into the unknown or poorly understood” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 127). The purpose of this practice is not to identify an answer to each question but to engage in a process of questioning, learning, understanding, and discomfort. Parallel to practices in social justice education, engaging in discomfort and exploring the unknown is central to innovative and revolutionary concepts and actions.

Chapter eight describes “learning democracy.” Democracy involves creating inclusion and facilitating broad engagement amongst all involved parties. Democratic leadership declares that all members have a responsibility and a right to lead. The authors detail the difficulties in defining democracy and all of the associated values. Additionally, the authors note that a present or active example of a fully democratic group may be difficult to identify. Mary Parker Follett, a leader who exemplifies democratic leadership, actively created environments that empowered the voice of all people, particularly those who were typically underrepresented,

In chapter nine, the authors discuss how to utilize hope effectively within leadership. Leaders who sustain hope know that struggles, particularly around social justice, will be difficult and potentially never-ending. However, these leaders look to their colleagues and their own experience for the possibility and evidence of success. As an example, the authors invoke Paul Robeson, whose perseverance as an instrument of change in race and culture in the U.S. lends itself as a remarkable example of hope in leadership.

In chapter ten, the authors discuss building community, a task that is dependent on the practice and implementation of the previous eight tasks. Community building is reliant on three factors: 1) consistent and open communication 2) “people who are part of a community [to] give up some of their individuality to identify with the group in order to achieve a common purpose,” 3) and a common goal developed by a group benefits the whole group.

In the last and final chapter, the authors integrate the many learning tasks and skills needed to be a leader for the common good. The authors describe the common goals, such as social justice of the leaders identified as examples throughout the text. According to the authors, leaders should be “committed to creating environments for healthy, fully realized human beings by ensuring that relationships were inclusive, empowering, and respectful” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 213). This chapter is an essential read from the book and will be very useful in implementing learning practices for just leadership.

### **Target Audience(s)**

The authors designed this text with several readers or constituencies in mind. The first and most obvious audiences are the activists, advocates, community organizers, and other community-based social change groups. However, the book is written for anyone that wants to have positive, social impact. The book is certainly accessible to college student readers and older adults. However, the authors place significant emphasis on critical reflection, perspective taking, and collective leadership, which may be most appropriate for college students that have reached more advanced or complex development. Additionally, the book, and its practices, is best understood if the reader has a basic knowledge of social justice concepts. However, the authors’ accessible, simple examples and definitions would lend this book to be read by those new to social justice.

### **Uses of Book**

This book could easily be given to college students in leadership programs or in social justice-based programs. It is an enjoyable read that provides examples that current traditional age students could relate to and understand. This text could be used to set the foundation, values, and approach of a group. For example, a service-based student leadership program may benefit from helping students understand the value of learning.

Although students could be asked to read the text in its entirety, I would suggest that individual or small groups of students each select a learning task and present this task to the entire group. Students may be put off by the size of the book, and it may take encouraging them to read a small selection to then get them interested in the book. The preface and the final chapters are essential readings for any groups using this text.

This text would also be very helpful for implementing organizations seeking to create a more collectively leadership process, deconstruct patriarchy and hierarchy within the organization, and empower members to become leaders. For example, this text would be a great training tool for a university women’s center that is seeking to flatten the organizational structure, empower employees to take ownership of the unit, and implement leadership styles that are congruent with feminist pedagogy.

Faculty who teach service-learning courses may also significantly benefit from the use of this text. The concept of learning tasks is deeply connected with service-learning pedagogy.

Faculty could use this text to help students reframe leadership and service within an academic context.

## Critique

A strength of the authors' approach is the examination of ideas from multiple perspectives. For example, in all of the chapters, the authors provide the potential dangers and pitfalls of the learning task. Thus, the authors are practicing the very learning tasks and values they are describing in the text. Additionally, the authors express clear and consistent congruency between values and practice. The authors exemplify many of the learning behaviors detailed in their research throughout the construction of their book; from how they address potential issues and concerns to the descriptions of processes required to create the book itself.

I think this book provides excellent content that is well described with tangible examples. The learning tasks interact with one another and the description of that interaction found in the later chapters provides a great conclusion for the readers interested in enacting these practices.

However, some of the learning tasks are very similar and share comparable descriptions and characteristics. The content presented in the text could have been condensed; the authors could have combined similar learning tasks or defined each task more acutely.

Many of the learning tasks described in the book have been in practice in community organizations and organizations based on feminist pedagogy. The authors named characteristics found in collaborative-development, consensus building, and many feminist practices within organizations. However, there is insufficient mention or reference of feminist pedagogy throughout the text.

## References

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## Reviewer

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