

Gardner, J. W. (1990). *On leadership*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Reviewed by Kat Slaby

Introduction

On Leadership is a uniquely written piece of work. John W. Gardner explains the many components that are necessary for a leader to be successful with a special twist of political insight. Gardner sets the stage for leadership within the first couple chapters of the book and continues to go more in depth as the reader delves deeper. *On Leadership* is an exceptional framework of leadership for its time giving great insight toward the future.

Theoretical frame/situate in body of literature

On Leadership was written in 1990, but provides great insight about leadership that is well before its time. “It is not my purpose to deal with either leadership or its related subjects comprehensively. I hope to illuminate aspects of the subject that may be of use in facing our present dilemmas – as a society and as a species” (Gardner, 1990). Gardner does a remarkable job detailing at least 10 elements that are needed for successful leaders in a majority of fields, including but not limited to, the contextual environment, levels of power, the leader constituent relationship, the community aspect and many more. Gardner discusses an element of leadership and then provides examples of ways that leaders have both successfully and unsuccessfully mastered these components giving a well rounded view. Throughout the book, Gardner creates a nice flow from chapter to chapter giving the reader a clear idea of what is next to come. This framework gives the reader a greater understanding as to the many intricacies of leadership and how to make the role most effective.

Elements of the Book

The Nature of Leadership

In the first chapter, *The Nature of Leadership*, Gardner begins by setting the stage about leadership. He makes a point to explain that the information in the book is “focused on the here and now” emphasizing that some of the information may be different if he were writing in a different time (Gardner, 1990). Gardner describes the term leader and leadership and provides short sections that are described in fuller detail later in the text. Within the first chapter, the reader is able to gain a fairly clear picture of how the remainder of the book will flow as well as to the type of language the author uses.

The Tasks of Leadership

This next chapter focuses on the tasks of leadership. Gardner writes about nine main tasks that he feels are “the most significant functions of leadership” (Gardner, 1990). The nine tasks that Gardner focuses on are envisioning goals, affirming values, motivating, managing, achieving workable unity, explaining, serving as a symbol, representing the group, and renewing. A lot of these tasks are also further explained in great detail in later chapters and in-depth examples are provided in order to create a clearer picture.

The Hearth of the Matter: Leader-Constituent Interaction

The primary focus within this chapter involves the relationship between the leader and the follower and the different roles that each play. Gardner notes, “The relationship between leaders and followers varies from one culture to another. This chapter deals chiefly with the interaction as it occurs in the mainstream of American life” (1990). Within this chapter, Gardner delves into not only the roles that each play but also how structure and control play into this relationship. There are many elements that fit into the role of the leader and the constituent that are extremely important in order to work successfully. These elements are emphasized within this chapter.

Contexts

Gardner ends chapter three with a segue into the following chapter regarding contextual leadership situations. Gardner explains that in this chapter he will “show through a number of examples how context and attributes come together to produce leadership performances” (1990). Gardner does exactly this. He provides ample contextually based examples within history to prove his points.

Attributes

Chapter five provides the reader with a list of 14 attributes for effective leadership. Gardner is sure to note that “the attributes that follow are not present in every leader. The importance of the attribute to effective leadership varies with the situation” (1990). The 14 attributes that Gardner suggests are a jumping off point for readers. While actively reading these attributes it may help to hold a context in your mind in order to determine if you should add or delete certain attributes.

Power

Leadership and power are two very different things. Gardner describes in great detail the difference between leadership and power and how they intermingle.

The Moral Dimension

Gardner begins this chapter by stating, “reflected in the following discussion are the values of this society at this moment in history, as seen through the eyes of one observer” (1990). Each section within this chapter addresses different examples of people and points of time in which society held different values.

Large-Scale Organized Systems

Chapter eight incorporates the large-scale organized systems into leadership opportunities. Gardner discusses various problems that can happen for a leader within a large-scale system and hones in on the important challenges that a leader will need to deal with such as communication, the media, and motivation.

Fragmentation and the Common Good

This chapter emphasizes the fact that there are many systems that all weave together. Gardner mentions, “We have many leadership pyramids. The leaders in the various pyramids do not all know each other – or want to” (1990). Tying in the political sense, Gardner frequently

discusses pluralism and its importance within the common good of the people, the organization, and the world.

The Knitting Together

Chapter 10 highlights the importance of bringing everything together. Gardner really focuses on the “how” in this chapter; through networking, resolving conflict, and coalition building. He ends this chapter by giving multiple examples of how influential these aspects can be within politics.

Community

“In some measure, what we think of as a failure of leadership on the contemporary scene may be traceable to a breakdown in the sense of community” (Gardner, 1990). This statement truly encompasses the essence of this chapter. Gardner delves into the depths of community by explaining what a traditional community may look like, ingredients needed within a community and how leadership skills tie in.

Renewing

“Leaders discover that the great systems over which they preside require continuous renewal” (Gardner, 1990). Institutions and organizations are in constant need of renewal as are leaders. Chapter 12 focuses on the process of renewal and the importance of this not only within an institution or an organization but also within the leaders of these areas. An emphasis is placed on the steps needed towards the renewal process.

Sharing Leadership Tasks

Leaders are found everywhere. *Sharing Leadership Tasks* discusses the many areas in which leaders can be found and utilized as well as why there is a need for leaders. With this in mind, it is important to note that constituents are a key role for leaders within various organizations. Getting the constituents and finding the untapped resources is imperative as a leader. This chapter also stresses the importance of getting the constituents to actively participate and learning how to work effectively together by working as a team.

Leadership Development: The Early Years

Chapter 14 explains the idea that leaders today cannot be specialists they need to be generalists. Having the educational system help young leaders prepare for this while not forcing them to specialize in areas is imperative. Gardner mentions, “At [the] college level, the best preparation is a liberal arts education” (1990).

Leadership Development: Lifelong Growth

“We cannot design an assessment procedure that yields a leadership aptitude score that is adequately predictive at age twenty or thirty. Nor can we expect our graduate and professional schools to send their graduates out with their future greatness prepackaged” (Gardner, 1990). Gardner addresses the fact that leadership develops over time and essentially is a lifelong learning process. One does not simply learn the leadership skills needed for life and then stop growing. Based on attributes, contexts, gender, career, and many other factors, leaders are shaped throughout their life for different situations.

Motivating

Motivation is key as a leader. Learning how to tap into the motivation of your constituents and creating buy-in is imperative. This chapter focuses on how leaders are able to achieve the motivation factor while providing examples that are relatable to current situations.

The Release of Human Possibilities

This final chapter focuses on the attitude of the future towards leadership. The ability to find the balance between optimism and realism will be essential in order to keep the renewal process alive.

Best Target Audience

On Leadership is a book that holds value. This book would serve several audiences well. John W. Gardner has a strong background in politics which shows in his writing and examples throughout the book. Those (both professionals and college-aged students alike) who are focused within the political science, international studies, government and history realm would thoroughly enjoy this work. Those within student affairs would truly be able to utilize the foundations of this book to help students at various college campuses unlock their leadership potential. Students at larger institutions may be able to have a larger impact with this book compared to smaller institutions simply because larger institutions have a bigger constituency base. *On Leadership* is an excellent example of the business world and being that student affairs can be seen and sometimes run as a business this book is a great resource.

Uses of Book in Practice

Reflecting back on the work of John W. Gardner several recommendations come to mind. Institutions around the country typically have various scholar programs. An environment that consists of students who are focused within the political science and history realm would make *On Leadership* a perfect requirement for the curriculum. With that being said, it is highly likely that a big portion of those students may also be leaders on campus. By having the students who are involved in the different scholar programs read this book they may be able to incorporate the information from the book into their everyday leadership style. This population of students would be able to directly relate to the examples listed in the book giving them a better understanding of how to improve their leadership skills. In addition, this book could be implemented at organizational workshops or retreats both as individual sections and as a whole unit. A semester long workshop series would easily be able to break the sections of *On Leadership* up and during each workshop focus heavily on each aspect giving the students a better and deeper understanding of all the elements. By the end of the semester this workshop series would have covered the entirety of the book.

Critique

On Leadership is a different kind of book. As a student affairs professional this book is not the typical leadership resource. Although the skeleton of the book has value, this book does have its shortcomings. John W. Gardner does an excellent job of giving examples about leadership...however, only in one particular area. This book is extremely heavy within the political field. Looking for examples and ways that could connect back to student affairs not only within the field but also for college students was a challenge at times. The incidences were few and far between. Chapter 14 Gardner gave a higher education example writing about a

college environment, primarily a liberal arts education. Gardner could have expanded more within this area in order to appeal towards the student affairs profession. Reading through the book the majority of the examples had to do with high levels of leadership such as presidents or political figures. Not all people may know a great deal about the high-level leaders that Gardner discusses. Gardner has extensive knowledge in this area given his background.

Terminology in certain areas is another critique. Gardner rarely mentioned mid- to low-level leaders, and but he did Gardner typically referred to them as the “grass roots”. During these instances, Gardner came off a bit degrading and condescending when mentioning these levels of leadership. Granted, he did say they hold value; however, it was crystal clear that he focuses the majority of his attention on the high-level leaders.

To Gardner’s credit I will praise him on the insight he has about leadership. Even though the book was published in 1990, Gardner held some pretty valid points about leadership that still hold strong today. The overall frame of the book is extremely relevant for anyone who is interested about leadership. Gardner did an excellent job of flow within the book. He was clear what each chapter would focus on and towards the end of each chapter provided insight as to what would be covered next giving the book a nice rhythm. Overall, while being frustrated with the lack of variety in terms of leadership examples, Gardner was clever by repeating certain people within the different chapters. In doing this, the reader is able to gain a better sense of different types of leaders evolving their leadership style and potential.

Reviewer

Kat Slaby graduated from Baldwin-Wallace College in May 2010 with a Bachelor of Science for Psychology and International Studies with a focus in Asian Studies. Kat is currently in her first year at Bowling Green State University in the College Student Personnel Master’s program. She plans on graduating in May 2012. Kat is currently a Graduate Assistant at Ashland University where she is the Residence Director for Fraternity Circle and the Graduate Assistant for Greek Life.

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