

Book reviews: Leadership



A review of the following South African publications on leadership published by Knowledge Resources:

Leading for engagement by Tracey Swanepoel

Trust-based leadership by Dr Charles Du Toit

Your leadership footprint by Dave van der Merwe

Leadership is a much debated and contested field of study and practice. And it continues to be so – as evident in the many publications on it and its prioritisation in the agenda of many Boards (Jivan, 2017).

As I had written in the June 2020 Fact Sheet, the leadership field is characterised by debates and disagreements on its very nature and what defines or delimits it. There are many critical and meta reviews that can help us navigate the trends as well as the ebbs and flow over time in how leadership is seen, attributed, and practiced. As Hunt and Dodge earlier observed, in their 2001 metareview, the leadership literature and the practice of leadership is characterised by “dépà vu” (p435) and “amnesia” (ibid).

We return to leadership repeatedly, both the theory and practice thereof. And in this returning, we resurface or find anew aspects of previous learnings and perspectives as well as find new learnings and perspectives. One of the critical threads through the recent decades is the criticism of the ‘perfect’ leader or one-size-fits-all ‘perfect’ set of leader attributes or behavioural competencies. And the acknowledgement of the work that needs to be undertaken by leaders (internally in their knowing, doing, and being), teams, and the organisation. Thus, a clear differentiation of leader and leadership development has become embedded in academia and practice.

In the book, **Leading for Engagement**, Tracey Swanepoel brings her own lens to challenging the assumption of the perfect leader, and she explores its impact on engagement and ultimately the organisation. She brings together her corporate experience in South Africa and abroad and the research she has engaged with to provide a lively and grounded engagement on leadership. She shares short stories to take us through leading for engagement. In this way she mirrors what she suggests in her book in terms of using stories to “breathe life into abstract concepts” (p92) and simplify and create dialogue. Tracey centres the book on engagement and questions why, with all their investments in leader development, organisations are experiencing disengagement. She argues that “by not recognising engagement as a fundamental issue, we also miss the link between engagement, discretionary effort and value creation” (p6).

Tracey suggests that leaders “wear themselves out playing whack-a-mole with the “iceberg” problems” (p5). We all familiar with the iceberg metaphor in L&D, OD, and change management for example. Tracey uses the metaphor to suggest that organisations are not addressing the underlying issues which centres around engagement. She also points out that the “pandemic has thrown the emotional landscape of the world of work into sharp relief” (p68). She explores what she terms as the “seven sins” that “kill engagement” (p9). She also provides the “seven secrets” to address these and “foster engagement” (p10), which include the secrets to leading yourself and others. As noted above, she explores these seven sins and secrets through stories, sharing her corporate experience. Tracey observes that “companies are intoxicated with leadership as a thing” (p20), fixating on the “perfect set of leadership attributes” and different models of leadership. She is not averse to these. She, however, argues that when organisations fixate on these, they lose sight of where their leading is leading to. What is their big picture and purpose? How is their strategy, culture, and leadership aligned? This and many other questions, Tracey explores through the book on the seven sins and secrets of engagement, sharing her and others’ stories and making these sins and secrets real. The Lego bricks story on page 117 is an example of this and it is a metaphor of the journey through the book. We may have the individual pieces or Lego bricks through various leadership development initiatives, but leading is the art of bringing these bricks together and forming something unique and contextual. It is visceral, real, and concrete for our own selves and others. Tracey’s book provides some of the Lego bricks on leading for engaging, and she illustrates these through her stories. However, the art is how you bring these together in your own self, world, and context. This is through your own stories and visual mediums. It is the rationale for the Visual Map technique that she shares in the book among other techniques.

Here is the rub of leadership. It is an art. There is no clear-cut and all-encompassing manual for leaders – in fact, that is the very problem that we find in leadership is the search for one and abdication of the work and responsibilities required of and for leading. This does not mean we are left to our own devices and can do as we please without accountability. And as HR practitioners we are tasked to create the

conditions and help enable leaders and their development. This is where the two other publications can help as they focus on the leader.

Dr Charles Du Toit in his book, **Trust-based Leadership**, also challenges the assumption of a one-size-fits-all leadership theory or model. Charles prefers to see leadership as a “personal calling and a choice as opposed to a theory” (p6). He takes the reader through a journey along nine principles he has distilled through his experience and engagement with the available research. He provides reflection exercises and visual cues the reader can engage with and work through. He also shares some stories from his corporate experience in South Africa. This he does in an accessible and non-technical manner, where he also touches in the end chapter on some aspects of the future world of work that leaders need to contend with. It is not a long, dense book. One of his messages in the book is that your “success [as a leader] lies in constant reflection and adjustment” (p96). Again, he asserts that leadership is a choice.

Connecting, harnessing relationships, and creating constructive and thriving environments are themes common through Charles and Tracey’s publications, and in Dave van der Merwe’s publication as will be discussed shortly. Charles states that “only if we deliberately and consciously connect can we be sure of building productive trust-based relationships with team members” (p38). Being deliberate and conscious is also a thread through **Dave van der Merwe’s** book, **Your Leadership Footprint**. In each chapter Dave poses specific and direct questions to leaders that are organised around a range of themes, all of which are centred by the question of your footprint. The themes that Dave explores are familiar ones, from reflecting on yourself and developing your own leadership perspective and fitness to driving team effectiveness, unlocking talent potential, creating shared value, and driving effective execution. Through the twelve chapters Dave shares his experience and provides key observations and practical tools for each question he poses. This akin to the Lego bricks analogy referred to above in relation to Tracey’s book.

Having courageous conversations with yourself and others is not easy. Dave addresses this in a chapter titled, ‘do you allow for courageous conversations that challenge the status quo’, and in other chapters on creating a constructive and collaborative environment. Charles similarly asks you to reflect on and challenge yourself. One of Dave’s questions is, ‘are you constantly curious, learning and seeking new ways of doing things.’ To return to the beginning of this review, the questions we can pose is as follows: are you open to relooking, re-examining, and re-finding your leadership? How are you helping others to re-look, re-examine, and re-find their leadership? As Dave asks, how will you be remembered. The three authors explore similar questions and themes through their different lenses on leadership and their different styles of writing. Their different styles may appeal to different sets of audiences. Together though their publications, with the sharing of their own stories, helps us navigate the leadership landscape in South Africa and our own approach to leading in a real and concrete way. That is, what we say we do and what we actually do. This is the familiar differentiation of what we espouse and what we

enact. In sharing their stories, the three authors create spaces for us to be open and frank with ourselves on what we espouse and enact when leading our own selves and others. They each ask in their own way, how each of us will want to be remembered. This returns us to Hunt et al's observation of déjà vu and amnesia that was cited earlier. We can adapt it and ask ourselves what we are deliberately not acknowledging or forgetting when reflecting on our own leadership journey and practice. And what we are dismissing too quickly as the we-seen-it-all-before and not undertaking the courageous conversations with ourselves and others on our leading and leadership in our organisations.