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Deeper Learning in Leadership: Helping College Students Find the Potential Within

Dennis C. Roberts; (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

Reviewed by Kathryn A. Tuttle

With a multitude of leadership development books currently available, Dennis C. Roberts' work stands out for a number of reasons: It centers on the needs of undergraduate students, focuses attention toward institutional fit and collaborative program development, and provides an excellent framework without prescribed rigidity. Roberts defines leadership as "conviction in action." He is a proponent of a holistic focus on students and their experiences both inside and outside the classroom (p. 17). This work focuses both on theory and practical application, with the implied conviction that a synergistic mix of both elements proves most effective.

Roberts feels that deeper learning in leadership is not best facilitated in a vacuum but that the larger academic community plays a substantial role in the learning process. The author sees this community as an ongoing interplay between faculty, staff and students. At the end of chapter one, Roberts stresses the need to carefully examine the roles played by faculty, staff and students in the learning process. He calls for a new paradigm that embraces the purposeful integration of the curricular, the co-curricular and the extra-curricular, capitalizing on existing connections and forging new partnerships.

Chapter two sets an historical context for leadership learning, while chapter three explores six specific models of leadership development. While some may find these chapters pedantic, they provide a necessary foundation for the subsequent exploration and integration of new theories and models.

Chapter four reviews several key skills necessary for developing leaders for the future. These skills are discussed in light of the context of globalization and its effects on the employability of graduates. Here, Roberts discusses leadership development related to research from the workplace and draws connections regarding how this information might be used in the context of higher education.

One of the models Roberts discusses, soul leadership, is based on the work of Janet Hagberg (2003), and focuses on leadership development through the discovery of "meaning, passion, calling, courage, wholeness, vulnerability, spirituality and community" (p. 274). It certainly sounds noble and rings of integrity to be faithful to our purposes and to ourselves, rather than to be focused on success as an outcome. However, as Christian educators, we are quite well aware of the condition of the heart and are faced regularly with the reality that not all our passions and those of our students are necessarily of the godliest origins. While the framework is valuable, we need to advocate for biblically sound foundational content. It is not enough to simply be true to one's self within the context of community values.

In chapter five Roberts invites his readers to explore what he terms a "Deeper Leadership" model. It is here that he begins to form a more cohesive picture of the process of leadership development by beginning to outline what he terms three paths toward deeper leadership: presence, flow, and oscillation. With all the prior historical

perspectives and the review of multiple models, I expected to finish this chapter with a succinct understanding of the author's model. However, I was greeted with another preparatory chapter in which the author introduced several models outlining the learning process involved in developing leadership. At the end of chapter five, Roberts finally begins to focus his readers. He states that, "Presence allows for the discovery of something worth doing, flow encourages one to remain constant to the vision, and oscillation allows creativity and high performance" (p. 128).

One of our main challenges with college leadership programs is the short nature of the university experience. Creating and sustaining vision during a four-year experience is often daunting. The typical student may be an observer during his or her freshman year, enter some form of initial leadership position during his or her sophomore or junior year and then possibly move on toward an internship or form of job experience during the senior year. Creating continuity and connecting prior learning to the "next" experience can be extremely challenging. Getting students to see beyond "their" impact and see this year as a way to invest in their future and the future of programs and other participants is a challenge. The overarching goals for this year must be tied to the fundamental mission and purpose of the institution. The ultimate goal is bigger than "this year!"

There are a number of spiritual and theological connections latent within the concepts presented by Roberts. For example, effective leadership is not about personal power or impact. In contrast, it is about having a larger vision outside of ourselves. Experiential processes are highly valuable. We are renewed and changed through stretching experiences and by negotiating situations that cause us to think and act differently. However, these experiences will change us more completely as we reflect and analyze their meaning and value and apply newfound ideas to our current thinking and behavior. Retreat and reevaluation are vital in the process of deeper learning in leadership. Our foundational question could be, "How will what I am learning and what I am doing support and advance the purposes of God?" I will know this more completely as I know him more and practice these principles in my world.

In chapter six, Roberts begins movement toward concrete steps involved in design and assessment processes. For successful program development, he encourages a large vision with a modest, focused beginning and ongoing assessment. Program development within the context of institutional values is of utmost importance. Sustainability of leadership development programs also hinges on active faculty and administrative involvement. One of the most valuable portions of Roberts' book lies in this chapter. Between pages 143 and 163, the author provides some key areas of focus, a series of questions to guide development and some suggestions regarding assessment and renewal of programs. Once again, the necessity of broad university support and constituency buy-in is stressed. Roberts does not lay out a prescribed program, but recognizes the necessity of consideration of the centrality of an institution's mission in the development of an effective leadership development program. The framework provided for the process of development is extremely helpful while non-confining. In addition, Roberts acknowledges that hard work lies ahead and that leadership program development is not a light-hearted endeavor.

In chapter seven, Roberts brings his earlier discussion of presence, flow and oscillation into the creative discussion, as he discusses the integration of international travel, service learning, assessments such as the StrengthsQuest instrument, and mentoring

relationships, as well as the development and use of learning portfolios.

In his final chapter, Roberts reiterates the shared responsibility of faculty, staff and students in the leadership development process. He recognizes the difficulties in this shared venture and notes that, “The relationships on all campuses are complex and idiosyncratic” (p. 213). At smaller institutions, collaboration may be essential, due to limited financial resources, yet paradoxically difficult given the territorial nature of some colleagues.

Again, the need for broad institutional buy-in to leadership learning is essential. What efforts toward leadership development already exist on our campuses and how can we bridge and co-opt these resources? Roberts ends his journey with a plea for humility. He states, “Humility that envelopes us in every interaction is likely to be appealing to the many stakeholders who would otherwise delight in challenging our intellectual, legitimate, or otherwise authority” (p. 216).

Roberts’ open-ended, non-prescriptive approach is refreshing. Rather than present a static, one-size-fits-all solution, he offers a broad array of historical foundation, current theory, innovative models, and assessment framework, then invites the reader to, sift, integrate, and innovate. It is clear that the author has taken the vision for development of quality leadership learning to heart. His recognition of the necessity of consideration of the core values of the institution is commendable. His refusal to present a one-size-fits-all answer, yet not abdicate in favor of a shell-only framework, values the complexity of the matter. Roberts’ intellectual honesty is refreshing as well. The author’s admission of his own gaps and what he may have omitted is forthright.

Indeed, it is clear that a great deal of foundational work will be required for the development of effective and enduring leadership development programs. We must know our institutional culture and mission, actively study this current generation of college students, and be aware of global expectations for our future graduates, as well as actively foster collaborative efforts across multiple constituencies. This book not only outlines historical and theoretical perspectives related to leadership development, but it provides invaluable guidelines for the program development process.

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