

Brief

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Better leadership: learning from the past and the future

Lessons from two books: Ibarra's *Act like a leader, think like a leader* and Dive's *Mission Mastery*

With so many books on leadership, why aren't there more brilliant leaders? Being a leader is complex and rapidly changing – and most feel they don't have any time for reading. We look at two recent books with very different takes: Herminia Ibarra shows how the requirement of leaders is changing rapidly and old ideas don't work. Brian Dive shares important 19thC thinking and how badly-applied these ideas have been since. Here is our summary.

Act like a leader, think like a leader

Surveys show that the challenges facing leaders in organisations today are changing fast. So, we must change how we develop ourselves for effective, successful senior positions. Ibarra's argument is that in this rapidly moving and unpredictable world, we will not *plan* and *think* ourselves into being a better leader – with insight and introspection. Instead we must act, experiment and learn from outside ourselves – what Ibarra calls 'outsight' which comes from finding new ways to do our jobs, new relationships and new ways of engaging with people.

At the heart of this view of effective leadership is the difference between a traditional *hub*, and new *bridge*, leader. Textbook effectiveness meant acting as a hub for your team: setting goals, assigning tasks, monitoring progress, managing team performance and creating a good climate. Stronger outcomes flow from being a bridge: aligning team goals with overall priorities, funnelling vital information and resources into the team to support goals, getting support of allies, enhancing visibility of team, and getting wider recognition for good team performers. Ibarra also shows how effective leaders find time to 'play': lose track of time, meander, be curious, random and borrow ideas.

Ibarra reminds us that no matter how compelling our big ideas, without buy-in not much happens. Buy-in does not come from people reading the right analysis in PowerPoint, but because of the way in which we have connected with them. She says that '*success in leading change = the idea + the engagement process + you*'.

Ibarra tells us that stepping up to a new role is not an event – it is a process that takes time through many stages. And her clear conclusions are to learn by doing, listening and adjusting, rather than by too much thinking in advance. And it will not be a smooth, linear journey – it will have diversions and setbacks on the way.

Mission mastery: revealing a 100-year-old leadership secret

While Ibarra points out that recent past is no guide to the future, Brian Dive shows that the 150-year-old foundation theories of leadership by German military theorists Clausewitz and Moltke are worth re-discovering - they are not the simple top-down, command-and-control principles we might assume.

Clausewitz's insight is the gap between strategy and execution caused by 'friction' (from physics – to explain the discrepancy between ideal and reality). Moltke specified the split between 'command' and 'control'. Dive says this is the clue to effective organisation: 'distributed leadership' – every level with clear accountability and empowerment. (About 15% of today's organisations' people would fit this definition of leader). Moltke said the senior leader's role was the 'what' (purpose) and why – the 'how' is delegated. Everyone needs to understand the what and why, so that they can take all their decisions knowing this context – and be accountable for them.

Dive shows that the technical source of clear accountability and distributed leadership is in the vertical dimension of organisation design – the number and nature of layers. Whatever people can do for themselves ought not be removed from their competence and taken over by others more senior, but done at the lowest level possible. In contrast the obsession of most organisation design is on lateral spans of control, which Dive says are an outcome not a goal. He also shows the over-emphasis on metrics drives micro-management - reducing accountability.

This is all about ensuring the best decision-making: the core of Dive's solution is to know how many levels of decision-making are needed for a particular organisation and what it does. If you are a retail bank operating in one country, how many levels of decision are there and what are they? If the answer is not clear, the organisation structure is a guess - with more risk, reduced performance and less resilience to changes in the context.