Harney, B. 2016. 'Developing leadership: Questions business schools don't ask'. Management Learning, 47(5): 626-629.

Business schools are increasingly said to be in crisis. What is clear from this collection is that the malaise is more significant than one single event can capture and is deeply rooted in a foundation of moribund theories and amoral assumptions. According to Mabey and Mayrhofer's central thesis, a key fundamental flaw involves the reduction of leadership to a set of morally neutral techniques coupled with the danger and deficiency of dominant functionalist, means-end understanding. In their introductory chapter, the editors raise a series of disconcerting questions with respect to the role of business schools, the perpetuation of rationality, learner dependency and passivity and the reliance on singular 'western mono-cultural worldviews'. The implication is a damning indictment that the agenda of developing effective leadership 'sells students short' (p. 16). To these problems and challenges, the chapters in this edited collection offer a series of enriching insights, multidisciplinary solutions and reflective resources meaning that 'questions not normally asked by business schools can be asked' (Conroy, p. 173). From the beginning, we are invited to disentangle charisma from character, with the former equating to the rational, heroic individualism and self-interest that haunts mainstream thinking, and the latter providing a more holistic, grounded understanding of individual identity framed by purpose.

The collection begins the conversation by solidifying the extent of the problem exploring how students are prepared for leadership (*Part 1*) and examining the robustness of key theoretical and moral assumptions (*Part 2*). In the opening chapter by Harle, we get a general restatement of some of the reasons why business schools have lost their way and how enhanced understanding, including via complexity theory, might open up new modes of thinking. Ward and Mayrhofer take up the theme of structural constraints, deploying a cybernetic logic to offer convincing systemic reasons for why business schools 'cannot see what they are supposed to see' (p. 46). If this leaves business schools ill-equipped to teach leadership, the chapter by Ng finds that this is equally true for students who are left to practice leadership. Focusing on identity, Ng argues that tools and frameworks targeted at enhancing productivity and outcomes leave the student of leadership bereft of the ability to cope with 'dilemmas raised by the balance of work and individuality' (p. 62). A consequence is the perpetuation of alienation and deprivation as individuals seek exile at work, being ever present but devoid of purpose and meaning. The contribution by Shymko reinforces this tendency, pointing the finger at the discourse of natural science which serves to neutralise, rationalise and render mechanistic our understanding of change. What follows is an assumed 'superman' style of leadership activity so that 'very little space is left for thoughtfulness, hesitation and empathy' (p. 69). Shymko takes issues with case studies which stress universal utility and trivialise change. Multiple interpretations of restructuring at Caterpillar are used to forcefully make the point. The argument that business schools are 'economical in their ideas and ethos' (p. 75) is clearly evidenced in *Part 2* where various stalwarts of the leadership curriculum are subject to critique and challenge. Contributions here examine the idealisation of growth, the assumption that leadership can be value free, the moral basis of capitalism and economics and the treatment of subjects. On offer by way of solutions are fostering debate and dialogue, co-operative models of managing, reflexivity, placing virtue at the centre of how leaders are developed and inviting a richer picture of those who work in organisations. In her contribution, Tomkins notes the importance of engaging with issues of meaning, vulnerability and limitation. Arguably, all the contributions in *Part 2* highlight the significance of this task, and in so doing, draw attention to a range of useful philosophical, cultural and spiritual resources.

*Parts 1 and 2* offer well-stated, but perhaps well-rehearsed, criticisms. The next two sections move to the vital domains of how philosophical and spiritual approaches can be applied to leadership development (*Part 3*) and pedagogic examples of how a moral voice might be (re)claimed in business schools (*Part 4*). It is here that the collection truly stands apart in its efforts to not only understand issues of leadership development content, but also the very process and application of leadership development techniques and ideas. By way of example, a superb chapter by Blakeley tackles a spiritual approach to leadership, taking what is frequently dismissed as abstract and idealist and rendering it valuable and accessible. This is a timely reminder of education's role in the formation of character accompanied with recognition that many of society's current challenges are 'in fact spiritual in nature, rooted in human characteristics such as greed and selfishness' (p. 152). Acknowledging some practical tensions, Conroy depicts the 'ethical distance' that resides between neoliberal learning and the virtues of practice excellence. A similar theme is evident in Hartog and Tomkin's discussion of a disconnect between an institutional rhetoric of care and experiential reality. Gaggiotti and Simpson usefully draw on Greek philosophy to emphasise the capability to theorise, something that rarely appears in learning objectives which are dominated by the concept of theory application as opposed to theory creation. It is clear also that rich understanding comes from cultural sensitivities and immersion as demonstrated by delving into French literature via the likes of Balzac, examining Hebrew wisdom, exploring the local meaning of terms such as 'global leadership' in China or 'respect' across a multicultural classroom and leveraging community-embedded knowledge, for example, Maori Wairua in New Zealand. Finally, in the spirit of a learning journey, Doherty offers an experiential and practical means to surface and question the assumptions underpinning managerial blockbuster texts as a means to develop critical facilities amongst students, appropriately directing attention to the nature of knowledge upon which business education is founded.

## Questions asked, answers gained?

This is a well-considered, timely and rich collection which evades a number of common criticisms as a result of the diversity of contributors, and the fact that critical assessment is embedded into every chapter. The collection does much to foster critical modes of questioning, but also goes further by offering a palette of alternative viewpoints and modes to reform teaching. In this spirit, it is greatly aided by bite-size chapter lengths, illustrative box inserts and examples and the use of rapporteurs to discuss the key themes of each section. While there is some repetition in recounting the ills of current business school practice across many of the chapters, arguably, this is a problem that warrants overstatement and needs further framing. In the absence of such critical reflection, business schools risk simply accepting and perpetuating the status quo, filling pails but not lighting any fires (Cunningham and Harney, 2012). Of course, it is possible that business schools are presented in a somewhat unitary fashion. Evidently, there is more diversity of thought both across and within business schools than a sweeping criticism can acknowledge. Even in the most conservatively titled syllabus, with the most normative learning outcomes, there may be shafts of interdisciplinary light and subtle modes of self-reflection.

While the collection is comprehensive in its breath of disciplinary insight and depth of knowledge, there are two noticeable areas where it remains surprisingly silent. One concerns an assessment of technology and social media and its paradoxical impact in liberating access to leadership content, while also perpetuating existing modes of understanding. Second, is a neglect to incorporate the gendered nature of leadership where stereotypes and bias inform much leadership thinking and are also dramatically witnessed in practice (Helfat et al., 2011). While the collection does an excellent job in bridging various cultural and disciplinary insights,

intersections with gender remain underexplored. A further limitation (acknowledged by the authors) is an underrepresentation of voices from Africa, South America and insights drawing on Islam or Buddhism. Also acknowledged is that the book is both authored by, and tends to reflect, a single stakeholder (p. 23). Future conversations and contributions may come from bringing current leaders and students into the discussion, for example, by extending the respondent or rapporteur as an entry point for multiple stakeholder voice. Moreover, while MBA students are obviously a key focus, attention could also be drawn to the formation of character and how ideals are communicated and coalesced earlier in the education cycle at undergraduate level.

It is logical given the approach and tone of the collection that a number of questions remain outstanding. Of particular interest is how business schools and leadership education might break free from the caged 'cycle of collusion' (p. 4) presented by Mabey and Mayrhofer in their introduction. Is it that current practice is so enmeshed and embedded that business schools can only reflect and reinforce the broader system in which they serve? What might act as a viable counterforce to (a) protecting the perceived value of the credentials business schools sell (p. 55), (b) conforming to stakeholder requirements, (c) operating via a reward system which privileges publications and downplays teaching capability (d) the reality that many solutions proposed (e.g. interdisciplinary teachings) pose political problems for the management of business schools. Of course, a longstanding leadership insight has it that no revolution ever started at the top. This collection certainly provides a means to locally critique, engage and develop a more holistic approach to what constitutes leadership. Another frequently heralded leadership insight is to lead by example; here, the editors have set the tone by donating all royalties from the book to charities Prospect Burma and Modem, United Kingdom, respectively.

Overall, this is a welcome and valuable collection which weaves together a rich fabric of interdisciplinary insight and prospective paths to redeem leadership development as currently promoted in business schools. The contributors move the focus away from narrow engagement in the guise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and modules on ethics offering self-reflection as a more sustainable mode of teaching about values and morals. The collection serves to put power and politics back on the radar, while in advancing spirituality and individual reflection, the book offers a holistic and grounded understanding of leadership. The collection is certainly a must read and provocative resource for those tasked with teaching and communicating leadership. It will also prove an important contribution to general conversations around more expansive business school education. It is entirely appropriate that the editors end the book with a conversation as opposed to an attempt at summation or premature conceptual foreclosure. In exploring questions business schools do not ask, it is clear that ignorance and lack of answers are friends rather than enemies of knowledge. This is one lesson many have yet to learn.

## References

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