Susan Komives & Wendy Wagner (editors)

ISBN: 978-0-470-44949-3 (paperback)
$29.88.

Reviewed by John W. Howard, III
School of Communication
East Carolina University
Greenville, NC 27858

One of the frustrations I have regularly experienced in the realm of leadership studies is with a seeming disconnect among theory, research, and practice. All too often, manuscripts capture one or two domains eloquently, but are only able to give light consideration to the third. However, to those involved in the scholarship of engagement it should come as no surprise that an insightful, innovative, and complete treatment of leadership would emerge from this discipline.

Komives and Wagner’s Leadership for a Better World: Understanding the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, is a great introduction to the intersections among engagement, leadership, service, learning, and self. It is very well framed for use as an undergraduate text to enhance service-learning, leadership, and engagement activities. Furthermore, it is thorough enough to serve as a reference and model for experienced and novice faculty alike who value leadership development in their fields of expertise.

The volume is an edited book with contributors that developed the “social change model of leadership” via an Eisenhower Grant from 1993-1996. The main product of that effort was a
guidebook produced through the Higher Education Research Institute. This volume is a full development and extension of the group’s initial work.

The collected chapters are grouped into five parts. The opening four chapters introduce the intersections of social change and leadership, and explain the social change model. Sections two through four highlight the three values groups that form the foundation of the model: “Social/Community,” “Group”, and “Individual.” The fifth part discusses in greater detail what it is to be an agent of change and how to become one.

The social change model of leadership is predicated on the observation that leadership is a function of interaction with others. That is, to lead, one must work with others. Others do not work for the leader. Furthermore, the approach is collaborative, non-hierarchical, and embraces transformation, contribution, and learning as part of the becoming process human beings experience.

In the first chapter, Wendy Wagner answers the question “what is social change?” and provides the reader with direction in recognizing it on a grand, as well as modest scale. Kristan Cilente follows in chapter two with a general overview of the social change model of leadership development and highlights its transformative, value-based, and non-hierarchical elements. Indeed, what the chapter does is describe a process not of leadership but of collaborative leadership/followership. José-Luis Riera follows in chapter three with a series of case studies and suggested frames in which one can picture oneself. The fourth and closing chapter of the first part by Nurrendina Workman elaborates more upon change, and greatly expands traditional notions of change and its significance.

The second part of the book, “Societal/Community Values,” consists of a single chapter on citizenship. In it, Jennifer Bonner illustrates what it is to be a citizen and how to navigate the challenges of engaging differing communities and generating support within them.

Part three elaborates on “Group Values,” with a chapter dedicated to each of the three values central to the model. Jordan England highlights collaboration and explores how such collaborative efforts are realized. Alex Teh follows with the role and development of common purposes. Cecilio Alvarez closes part three with a chapter on approaches to “controversy with civility,” and pays particular attention to the importance of maintaining relationships with others in the face of disagreement.

Part four elaborates on the final group, “Individual Values.” The section is opened by Justin Fincher with a discussion of the consciousness of self. The responsibility of the individual in engaging leadership is not simply to be “aware” but to be mindful of what is transpiring as it is transpiring. This attending to the self continues in Tricia Shalka’s chapter regarding congruence; that good leadership consists of alignment of thought and action. Ashley Kerkhoff and Daniel Ostick close part four with a focus on commitment. Group success starts with individual dedication, effort, and support.
The fifth and final part of the book consists of the final chapter and an epilogue. The final chapter by Marybeth Drechsler and William Jones gives a more in-depth treatment of what it is to be a change agent. Their discussion is progressive, insightful and illustrative of the coherence of the model and the text. Editors Susan Komives and Wendy Wagner close in the epilogue with a call for student (and faculty) involvement in social change.

The most engaging dimension of this approach is that it offers a coherent and manageable framework for understanding the nature of, need for, and ways to create social change through a leadership lens. The idea that leadership is a process is not new in and of itself. That leadership is a process that, in tandem, is non-hierarchical, transformative, value-based, and serves self and community, is a very real step forward in conceptualizing and practicing leadership, engagement, and citizenship.

*Correspondence concerning this review should be addressed to John W. Howard, III, School of Communication, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858, howardjo@ecu.edu.*