

BOOK REVIEW

Alan Willett – Leading the unleadable: How to Manage Mavericks, Cynics, Divas, and Other Difficult People NY: AMACOM, 22 p.

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According to McCleskey (2014), the study of leadership spans over more than 100 years. Leadership has thus been defined and conceptualized in many different ways along the way. Bass (2008) argues that the quest for a single characterization of this concept is useless and that regarding the correct choice of a definition, what matters is the specific aspect concerning leadership, that is important to the individual. Thus, when it comes to the book of Alan Willett, “Leading the unleadable. How to Manage Mavericks, Cynics, Divas, and Other Difficult People”, the aspect that is important for the author refers not only to managing such team members, as the title misleadingly states but moreover, to transforming them, and their peers alike, in “tremendous team players everyone wants them to be”. This approach falls under the paradigm of the Transformational Leadership which is one of the most studied and debated concepts in the field of leadership, in the last 30 years (Diaz-Saenz, 2011, p. 299).

Burns (1978) described the transformational leader as an individual who raises the consciousness of the followers regarding the value of the outcomes and the way of reaching them. Bass (2008), added that the transformational leader also raises the need’s level of the followers from basic needs to self-actualization and achievement. These are the exact main points Alan Willett intends to make along with his book. With a focus on problem employees, he emphasizes on aspects

such as the importance of creating a sense of purpose and a need for excellence, which are in line with the definition of a transformational leader, mentioned above.

Having experience acquired from the field of practice, Alan Willett shares, in his book, some of the key points derived from his direct implication in consulting some of the top tier high technology organizations around the world, such a NASA, Oracle and Microsoft. The book is mainly structured around practical advice and case studies of real-life situations that the author has worked with, and it is addressed to people who find themselves in positions of leadership. Each part of the book has reflection points at the end, where the reader is invited to think about how the main points of the chapter could be applied to his own experience.

The book has four main parts, each of them addressing a specific facet of the leadership situation, that are further divided into more chapters. The first chapter, The call to exceptional leadership, introduces the main recurrent themes and ideas, that function as a backbone for the parts that follow. This part addresses ideas that the reader has to internalize itself to become a leader capable of inspiring others. As the author states, leadership is a choice that has been made by the leader whether he/she has acknowledged it yet, or not, and one of the critical points to lead the unleadable is first to take ownership of this position. Another critical point of the first part

is the differentiation made by Allan Willett, between leadership and exceptional leadership. His conceptualization of outstanding leadership fits very well with the way that transformational leadership is depicted by literature. He states that a change of mindset is needed to switch to extraordinary leadership so that the facts that one might perceive as obstacles and problems will be viewed as challenges. Here, the author emphasizes the importance of setting goals that have an intrinsic personal value.

Another point made by the author is, is that to achieve the mindset necessary for leading difficult people, the leader must start from the idea that the other people also strive for excellence themselves. The goal of the leader becomes helping such individuals grow within his lead and teaching teams to manage their troubles without the involvement of the management. Quality, progress and the wellbeing of the team members, are seen as indicators of a leadership style that aims at excellence.

The above-mentioned key points are further transposed in the second part, The leader in action. Spotting trouble, dealing with trouble. As the leader's responsibility is to the group, it is essential that he takes action in the case of a troublesome situation or individual. First, it is important that the leader becomes aware of why the condition is necessary to be dealt with, both for him and for the group, and then he is invited to take part in a reflective process to determine what emotions does the situation evoke and why. A non-judgmental attitude is suggested when addressing the problematic individual. The importance of a follow-through plan is also made clear. Emphasis is placed on setting objectives that start from the idea that success is the possible outcome if we have decided to keep the individual in the organization, and on the process of teaching other team members to help their colleague in his development.

The process of goal setting is also substantial, for the third part "The leader in action. Preventing trouble". The author starts from the idea that there is a general need for difficult tasks as long as these are viewed as valuable, and thus the process of setting goals and expectations becomes crucial for building a sense of purpose. Another key point in

preventing trouble is by making sure you have a good start, which is further debated in this part, containing specific techniques and ideas.

The last part, "Leading leaders" is focused on two main themes: Leading a particular group of people composed of individuals who themselves hold leading positions, and learning to lead yourself. Regarding leading a group of leaders, differences are drawn between this situation, and the case of leading regular followers and some techniques are offered an example for early detection and solving of problematic situations. According to Alan Willett "if you truly want to be an exceptional leader who can consistently provide great value, to have positive impact, and even to transform troublesome situations to tremendous, then the focus must start with your inner game of leadership." He further suggests focusing on the "leadership sweet spot" that enables the individual to draw more energy from tasks, than the amount of energy he/she invests in these tasks. The leadership "sweet spot" is at the intersection of three main factors: Passion, that in the conception of the author is similar to the flow state and refers to the feeling of not noticing the time passing, when engaged in a task, Competence, defined as the skill set necessary for the completion of jobs, and Value that the work provides to yourself and others. Guidelines are also offered on how to manage your energy levels.

Across all the four main parts of the book, there is a set of recurrent themes that come together as important and function as a red wire to guide the reader. First, there is the concept of Ownership and self-awareness that focuses on establishing and prioritizing the things that hold value and contribute to a sense of purpose, and then taking responsibility of your choice and of the process of following this choice. To facilitate this process, emphasis is placed on the importance of operationalization, of both goals and indicators that you have attained your target. The reader is encouraged to set goals and indicators that follow a high standard, aiming at excellence. All these are backed up by a change of mindset. Once the leader has taken ownership of the decision to lead, she/he will see the process, not as an obligation but as a choice which will further lead to a change in the perspective of everyday work. The leader

will go from having to make it through the day to make the best of the day and helping the team grow as well along the way. These aspects could be considered the foundation that the books is built on.

Derived from practice, *Leading the unleadable*, also contains many great examples of specific cases in which the application of suggestions recommended by the author have proven efficient for different leaders and managers. However, the book lacks the theoretical part, as it does not provide evidence of being backed up by the scientific literature, nor does it contain any mention of frameworks or theories that the reader could further investigate. In some cases, overgeneralizations are made, such as the emphasis placed upon setting standards of excellence and pushing the limits, without mentioning that a mistake can result from the overall growth of workload without taking in the account the challenges and hindrances in our specific context. These aspects, although, are somewhat justified as the book is aimed at people who already have a leadership position and can supplement the information derived from the book with their own experience. In this case, the book could offer a set of insights and could prove to be a good inspiration

source to boost one's motivation for improving its leadership game.

"Leading the unleadable" by Alan Willett is addressed to leaders but is an easy read for anyone interested in the topic of leadership. It focuses on practical perspective, containing both examples and reflection points to keep the reader engaged. The book's central affirmations are in line with the theory of transformational leadership, and they aim at offering support for leaders who wish to make a change, maximize their resources, and to transform the "troublesome in the tremendous".

References

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