

Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice

by Stephen D. Preskill and Stephen Brookfield

Published by Jossey-Bass, 2009, 247 pages

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As new students begin to trickle onto college campuses for the fall semester, it is important that we begin talking to them about the art of leadership to help students invest in the campus community beyond the academic degree they are seeking. In *Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle for Social Justice*, Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield discuss the paradigm of performing leadership in terms of the paradigm of learning leadership. The assertion made is that until individuals become effective learners of the community and texts around them, they will be unable to put sustainable change into motion. For the authors, learning is the first step of leadership; until one commits to a life of learning, they cannot commit to leading. The authors posit that leadership should be collaborative versus individualistic, create positive and sustainable change instead of maintaining the status quo, and more often be facilitative rather than directive. Ultimately, leadership must aim to provide an environment in which all members of the community have equal opportunity to participate in the leadership and decision-making process for the community. In order for this to occur, leaders must place learning at the center of their leadership paradigm.

Throughout the book, the authors provide nine essential learning tasks that they believe are identifiable with the learning leader. At the end of each learning task, they profile an effective social justice leader who exemplified that learning task. Some of the leaders profiled include: Jane Addams, Nelson Mandela, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Myles Horton, Aldo Leopold, Mary Parker Follett, Paul Robeson, and Cesar Chavez. The entire book is viewed through the lens of learning as a way of leading through social justice. Each learning task is explained thoroughly and extrapolated to various social justice issues that persist in contemporary culture.

The book focuses on learning tasks that are best described as ongoing vectors which may develop along different, but parallel, timelines. While the authors believe that each learning task must build on the ones before it, it is important to note that contemporary society is not a vacuum, and a more circular nature may better describe the order of development. Each event an individual confronts will necessarily alter and further develop a number of the learning tasks which may enhance future progress toward evolution of the learning leader.

The first essential learning task the authors discuss is “Learning to be open to the contributions of others.” The skill is described “as the ability to have an openness and willingness to process a variety of alternative viewpoints, to be receptive of the contributions of all potential members [of the community], and to be willing to open and maintain honest dialogue around each member’s perspectives and contributions” (p. 21). The philosophy behind this learning task is that everyone has something meaningful and educational to add to the community. From a social justice lens, the authors assert that by not remaining open to contributions from others, leaders continue to promote the hegemony of dominance by the dominant culture, while quieting those with less power and negating the value of their existence.

The authors particularly emphasize “learning to support the growth of others” because it encourages members to actively participate in the community to which they belong. “Supporting

others involves challenging normative practices, providing resources to help people do their jobs well, and personally knowing members of the group and their future goals” (p. 61). From a social justice perspective, growth has often been reserved for the dominant and elite groups. The authors recognize that to truly support the growth of all members, the majority may have to be restricted in order for the minority group(s) to grow. Often, for that to occur, something must change, and traditionally the flexibility has fallen on the dominant group.

The authors challenge this paradigm. As they emphasize the individualistic nature of current American culture, the authors spend significant time expressing the need for “learning collective leadership.” The basis of their argument is that leaders should learn to create a shared vision among all group members and that positional leadership should rotate among members continuously. It is important that leadership never remain the sole responsibility of the privileged few, but it should instead be shared among all members, especially those whose voice often goes unheard. In theory, this should promote all members to do their best work on behalf of what is best for the specific group or cause they are working toward. It should also provide an environment in which raising questions is not seen as ignorance but as a sign of curiosity and ongoing learning.

The authors imply that competing ideas, visions, and actions be discussed openly and learned from by each member taking part in the process (p. 89). Ideally, all members of the community would be involved. The authors note that this process requires members sacrificing a portion of their own identity and taking on part of the group identity. They argue that in this community there is no place for individuals wanting credit. The community should receive all the credit for the common good, as the entire community is putting in the effort.

From a social justice perspective, it is difficult to build this somewhat utopian view of community due to the individualistic principles on which the country was founded. This model of community, to be successful, must negate the idea that “if you work hard enough, you can be anything you want to be or do anything you want to do.” Other learning tasks in this book include learning critical reflection, analyzing experience, questioning, democracy, and sustaining hope in the face of struggle.

The book divides each learning task into manageable and pragmatic sections. It provides background and benefits of the task, information on how to develop the task, where and how the task has been practiced, and hindrances to the practice of the task. The authors conclude with a profile of a social justice leader who has exemplified this learning task.

While first-year students may not specifically connect with each of the social justice figures, the book will provide them with a personal narrative and connection that is likely to impact both the mind and the heart. The authors make a call to action for becoming agents of positive, sustainable change. The book would be ideal for common reading in a leadership course or leadership living learning community. It could also serve as an institutional message of the expectations for students entering their first year of college, acknowledging that it is important for the students to become active members of the community in order to support and encourage equal participation of every member.

The content of this book connects first-year students to issues that are much larger than themselves. It can motivate internal purpose that many students may not have yet found, or it may sustain and enhance convictions that already exist for them. The book is truly interdisciplinary in nature and would be an effective connection between academic and student affairs experiences that students encounter.

The concepts presented will help students apply knowledge from the classroom and their extra-curricular experiences to the real world that awaits them a few steps from the campus boundaries. Many students will walk away from this book feeling challenged and empowered with resources to help them perform social justice and leadership tasks within the contemporary society.