



Leadership & Organization Development Journal

Article Information:

To cite this article: Jeffrey D. Yergler, (2011) "Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty", Leadership & Organization Development Journal, Vol. 32 Iss: 3, pp.316 - 318

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Book Review : Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty

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RR2011/4

Review Subject:Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and UncertaintyNick Obolensky

Publisher Name:Gower Publishing Limited

Place of Publication:Farnham

Publication Year:2010

ISBN:-13 978-0566089329

Price:\$124.95 (hardback)

Article type:Review

Pages:238 pp.

Keywords:Adaptive leadership, Chaos, Complexity science, Taoism, Yin, Yang, Paradox, Polyarchichal leadership, Followership

Emerald Journal:Leadership & Organization Development Journal

Volume:32

Number:3

Year:2011

pp.316-318

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ISSN:0143-7739

The topic of adaptive leadership has become an expression common to leadership discourse. The model of adaptive leadership, developed in detail by Heifetz (1994) and further developed and defined in his later works (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002; Heifetz *et al.*, 2009), is designed to maximize the efficiency of leadership in the face of disruptive external or internal change. Obolensky's (2010) work is a marvelous resource that connects adaptive leadership with complexity science. Obolensky (2010, p. x) attempts to show how leadership can be responsive and adaptive to environmental contexts characterized by systemic change expressed through the paradoxes of order and chaos, complexity and simplicity. This is leadership that is responsive to leveraging organizational undercurrents that can build a solid foundation for continued organization change.

This book requires a good deal of familiarity with the nomenclature of organizational leadership and complexity science. This would be an ideal text for a masters- or doctoral-level class on leadership and complexity. It is not designed for those newly baptized into leadership studies. However, Obolensky's (2010) expends considerable effort make difficult concepts understandable to the reader.

There are four parts to this book. Chapters 1 to 3, which will be addressed in this review, contain the bulk of the information for the reader while Chapter 4 includes only a few pages of suggestions for next steps. The four parts are followed by four detailed appendices, an excellent bibliography, and index. Obolensky (2010) also includes detailed and extensive footnotes, meticulous graphs, and practical questionnaires which can be used by leaders to diagnose their organizations.

In the critical Part 1 of his book, Obolensky (2010) describes two lenses or approaches that are designed to help the reader understand the concepts that will follow in the rest of the book. The first lens is Obolensky's belief that organizations have and continue to move toward a polyarchical approach to

leadership. Moving away from leadership deposited in the hands of a select few to leadership in the hands of many creates leadership that is more nimble and responsive to complexity. Polyarchichal leadership requires leaders to be adaptive (malleable and permeable) as they guide the organization. Adapting to the presence of chaos and complexity has and will continue to play increasingly important roles in leadership praxis while the leadership relying on determinism and control is and will continue to diminish in its importance and allure.

Because living with paradox is required of adaptive leaders operating within a polyarchical organization, Obolensky (2010) draws the second lens from Taoism. Taoism, and in particular the writings of Lau Tzu, provides four principals that can guide the adaptive leader through organizational complexity. These principles include defining a new way forward, working with and preserving the tension of the Yin and Yang paradox, the shifting of organizational entities to more of a Yin orientation, and adaptive leadership that is comfortable with more observation, learning and therefore less action (pp. 6-9).

The balance of Part 1 describes how five global trends (military technology, communication technology, transportation technology, and human awareness) are pointing toward increased complexity and ambiguity for leadership practice. These trends are driving the requirement for organizations to evolve or risk obsolescence. This evolutionary process, though characterized by chaos, invites leaders to use a more polyarchical approach to leadership whereby those up and down the organization provide input that fosters collaborative and more effective decision making despite the complexity created by processes.

In Part 2, Obolensky (2010) speaks specifically to the chaos and complexity. This section of the book is particularly dense and demanding. Obolensky takes the reader into the background of chaos and complexity research. He begins with a discussion on quantum mechanics, moves through a thorough excurses on chaos theory and complexity science. Chapter 7 of Part 2 brings the more obtuse conversation about chaos and complexity into a more practical organizational application. This reviewer found this chapter to be one of the stronger in Obolensky's book.

Part 3 addresses leadership, followership, and the practice of adaptive leadership. Obolensky (2010) explores the meaning and work of leadership highlighting the approach of Hersey and Blanchard and the Eisenhower Matrix (as cited in Obolensky). The topic of followership is studied using the five levels of followership based on the work of Oncken and Wass (as cited in Obolensky). The final component of Part 3 examines adaptive leadership again using the structure of the Hersey and Blanchard model explored earlier in the section.

Obolensky's (2010) book has a number of strengths to be noted as well as a few weaknesses. First, Obolensky's research on chaos and complexity combined with leadership practice is thorough, detailed, and more than a little persuasive. Second, his arguments are supported by sound research and a strong familiarity with organization dynamics. Third, he manages to bring his research into practical organizational application. Finally, Obolensky works strenuously throughout the book to help his readers through some very weighty and complex topics. On the issue of weaknesses of Obolensky's book, there are only a few. First, the very strength of this book, its thoroughness and detail on the matter of complexity, chaos, and adaptive leadership, will be overwhelming to many students (and perhaps some practitioners) of leadership who are unable to grasp the depth and breadth of Obolensky's treatment of the subject. Second, some sections may be difficult to understand and may derail the attention and interest of the reader. Third, there seems to be areas of discussion on chaos and complexity as it is applied to adaptive leadership and followership that are over-and-above what is called for or what may actually be helpful to the reader.

In light of its strengths and despite its few limitations, I would recommend Obolensky's (2010) book to those graduate-level students of leadership who are seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which macro and micro currents of chaos and complexity are inviting continued organizational evolution and adaptive leadership. This book will also be a strong support to researchers and scholars.

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Printed from: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?issn=0143-7739&volume=32&issue=3&articleid=1923604&show=html> on Friday January 27th, 2012
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