

# Reality Leadership

Dean Williams 2005, *Real Leadership—Helping People and their Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges*, Berrett Koehler, San Francisco, 288pp, ISBN 1 5767 5343 3, \$US27.95 (hardcover).

Calling your boss a counterfeit leader might not be a great career move, but it might explain all those long meetings that seem to go around in circles, useless reports that gather dust on the bookshelves and the continual sense of panic and urgency running through your organisation. In his new book *Real Leadership—Helping People and their Organizations Face Their Toughest Challenges*, Dr Dean Williams from the Centre for Public Leadership at Harvard University sheds some light on the difference between real leadership and counterfeit leadership.

Fundamentally, real leadership gets people to confront reality and change values, habits, practices, and priorities in order to deal with the real threat or the real opportunity the people face. It facilitates improvements in the human condition. Counterfeit leadership, on the other hand, provides false solutions and allows the group to bypass reality.

Our communities and organisations are often keen on quick-fix solutions which mask the real issues and allow us to avoid the hard work associated with confronting difficult issues. Social issues in particular such as child abuse, youth suicide and race relations especially suffer. Williams distinguishes between different challenges in different circumstances for those wishing to exercise leadership—ranging from the turmoil of the crisis and activist challenge to the development challenge for more established organisations. These challenges are:

- **The Activist Challenge:** Provoking in order to challenge the prevailing wisdom and values to allow new ideas and realities to be embraced

- **The Development Challenge:** Drawing out a group's latent abilities to get the entire system performing at a higher level
- **Transition Challenge:** Culture change to refashion loyalties, mind-sets and priorities towards a new values-set that copes with a new reality
- **Maintenance Challenge:** Especially during times of crisis, to protect what is of core value until the threat passes
- **Creative Challenge:** Igniting the imagination of people by breaking from routine activity long enough to lead to a new solution or strategy
- **Crisis Challenge:** To reduce the explosiveness of a situation when a crisis arises and people are anxious, bewildered and in a highly vulnerable state. To then work on the underlying issues which might help avoid similar crises in the future.

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Most real life situations are a combination of these challenges and it is important to identify the Principal Challenge on which most energies need to be focussed. This steers away from the '10 point plan approach' and any notion that one size fits all, looking instead to the underlying system dynamics that stop organisations and countries from progressing. Real leadership is seen as engaging with the people, organisation or country as a shared enterprise.

Dr Williams is an Australian and his book provides rich examples of both successful and unsuccessful leadership interventions including East Timor, Weary Dunlop, Malcolm Fraser and the introduction of multiculturalism, Burke and Wills, Governor William Bligh and the NSW Rum Rebellion, Lee Kuan Yew and the Singapore experience, Enron, Japanese transition in the 19th century, the Chinese cultural revolution, creation of the US Constitution, women's suffrage movement in the US and Lawrence of Arabia.

Throughout the book, Williams highlights the need to develop key understandings around factions, complexity, dominance, avoidance and crises. He then expands on the core requirements of exercising real leadership including clarity of purpose, responsibility, partnering, adaptive work, working with uncertainty, creating the right environment for change, reframing issues, challenging existing values, insight and wisdom, strategy, innovation, maintaining hope and keeping a focus on core values.

How does it work in the real world? I'm fortunate to be doing some work with Dr Williams in Madagascar at the moment where we are putting this model into practice in advising the President and Ministers on Leadership Development. Using these core concepts, this has been a major intervention into government and country. The history of Madagascar had been one of colonial occupation followed by a socialist government. With the democratic election of a new President in 2002, the country has embarked on dramatic culture change, with the

reform of most sectors and an open engagement with the international community. It is a poor country of 18 million people where eighty five per cent of people live in rural areas on a subsistence income of about \$1 a day. It faces huge challenges, especially in the social sector with health and education, and suffers from lack of infrastructure, especially in the transport sector.

Instead of avoiding underlying issues, the real leadership approach has allowed us to use current crises and political issues as vehicles for building longer term sustainable leadership capacity. Facing multiple leadership challenges, it has been essential for Ministers to

be able to identify the Principal Challenge in order to set priorities and steer resources into the most needed areas. A lot of this work has been developing problem solving capabilities at senior levels—correctly analysing the reality of a situation, building the capacity to generate new options, consider alternatives, explore possibilities and reach creative solutions. This has helped develop a preventative culture where potential crises are identified quickly and action taken before they become a major problem. In a country where ‘consensus’ is highly valued, it has also been important to encourage alternative views as sources of new ideas rather than a threat to

harmony. Action now focuses across all the leadership challenges - questioning values, developing latent abilities, as well as, dealing with crisis situations. This is all part of building practical partnership and collaborative problem solving skills which allow organisations to reach their full potential.

Williams has worked around the world with organisations ranging from major corporations to tribal groups. This experience is reflected in his practical no-nonsense approach. It is great to see more Australian perspectives on these leadership issues emerging from Harvard. Highly recommended.

Paul Porteous

## The Heat Of Democracy

Daniel Ross 2004, *Violent Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 192pp, ISBN 0 5216 0310 2, RRP\$34.95 (paperback).

The exporting of democracy has been the preoccupation of Western powers for sometime. ‘Democratic Imperialism’ as Daniel Ross calls it (p. 39), has advocates from every corner of the globe. These advocates see democracy as the form of government worth exporting (p. 41), yet actually understanding the characteristics that make up democracy and coming to grips with the ugly side of democracy has rarely been seriously discussed. In *Violent Democracy* Ross unabashedly takes the reader on a journey that exposes the less appealing aspects of democracy. Ross does so without taking the reader through the expected linear progression from the birth to present day democracy. Rather, he captures the complexity inherent in the task of exposing democracy and its workings by illustrating democracy as having web-like characteristics (though this is not a metaphor he uses). Every aspect is linked back to the creation of another layer of characteristics either incorporated into the web by

design or circumstance. The centre of the web holds a place for the overriding characteristic of democracy: violence.

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Ross explains that, ‘*Violent Democracy* is concerned with the thought that the very idea of democracy is violent. It argues that the concepts of a people, a border, and of foundation are violent in themselves, because they are all ideas that must be imposed, in spite of their impossibility, in order to get democracy going’ (p. 151). This view of democracy is not new or extraordinary, however in context of the ‘New World Order’ and current affairs in general, this book is both timely and extraordinary in its sheer audaciousness in bringing to light that which in daily life we ignore at our peril. Ross

unapologetically illustrates, with numerous examples, the hypocrisy inherent in exporting democracy and democratic ideals. He not only uses examples of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also turns the microscope on the workings of democracy in advanced democratic countries such as the United States of America and Australia. Perhaps as a result of his Australian background, this country features prominently. Ross uses ample examples, such as Australian law on indigenous issues to highlight the inherent violence found in democracies, not least in Australia.

Additionally, what makes *Violent Democracy* an outstanding addition to the literature on democracy is its exploration of the plethora of themes that make up what is understood as democracy. Ross explores and deconstructs the relationship between religion, the law and social contracts, as well as painting a very detailed canvas of