

# *The Dance of Leadership: The Art of Leading in Business, Government, and Society*

by Robert B. Denhardt and Janet V. Denhardt

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Reviewed by Leigh Hersey

Leadership is often sought after, studied and envied. Much research has focused on what makes a leader. Despite the volumes of research, no one has yet reached a consensus answer. “Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (Burns, 1978, p.4). A topic that has been heavily researched within the last century, early leadership studies examined the traits and characteristics of individual leaders. Initial research focused on the physical attributes of leadership figures such as their height and their attractiveness. In a review of early leadership literature, Stodgill (1948) noted that the personal characteristics that most researchers found in leaders included capacity, achievement, responsibility, participation, and status. As theories moved from focusing on traits to focusing on skills, they became more aware of the relationship between the leader and the follower. Hersey and Blanchard (1969) built on earlier studies by Ohio State University and the University of Michigan which found that strong leaders needed to pay attention to both the task at hand as well as the relationship with the follower. Hersey and Blanchard determined that the maturity of the relationship with the follower influenced how much attention a leader should pay to each of these two aspects. More recently, research has shifted to the process of leadership. Unlike earlier leadership theories, process leadership theories allow anyone to be a leader, not just those in positions of authority. It also acknowledges that people can be leaders at different times. Burns (1978) described two kinds of leaders—the transactional leader and transformational leader. Transactional leaders “approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another” (p. 4). Transformational leaders institute change on a whole new level, improving both the organization and the people associated with it, based on high moral values. Burns views leadership as being value-laden, arguing that one can’t be a leader if the outcome is not for a betterment of society.

While many of these studies have taken a very quantitative approach to their methodology, in *The Dance of Leadership: The Art of Leading in Business, Government, and Society*, Robert Denhardt and Janet Denhardt explore the “special something” (p. 4) that is hard to explain, but followers and leaders alike recognize as being the mark of a good leader. Denhardt and Denhardt consider this quality of leadership—the “artistic dimension of leadership” (p. 10) that goes beyond what

can be explained through scientific measurements and manipulation of numbers. They believe that “without art, leadership is merely management” (p. 11).

In a multi-year project that culminated with this book, the authors interviewed artists, musicians, dancers, and choreographers, along with traditional leaders in business, government, and nonprofit organizations. Through this series of interviews, the authors were able to describe a unique set of leadership characteristics that have been given less attention by other leadership scholars. Common themes that surfaced with both the artistic individuals and the organizational leaders include:

- An awareness of the importance of space, time and energy;
- Rhythm;
- The use of images and symbols in communicating;
- Improvising with creativity and spontaneity; and
- Focus, passion, and discipline.

The Denhardts dedicate a chapter to each of these aspects of the art of leadership. They include a variety of stories from those they interviewed to provide examples of how these aspects are applicable in both the artistic world and the organizational world.

The understanding of space, time, and energy has an important place in leadership. “One of the important roles of the leader is to organize the flow of energy through time and space so as to best achieve valued results” (p. 27). The Denhardts maintain that organizations have a rhythm, much like that of a musical performance, reflecting the underlying activities of an organization. Leaders should recognize and coordinate the rhythms of their organizations, both in the cyclical aspect as different times of the year reflect different rhythms, and the different rhythms that exist between different departments. “A key element of the leader’s capacity to influence the emotional tenor of a group is the capacity to understand and to shape the group’s rhythm” (p. 46). Imagery, symbols, and metaphors play an important role in both dance and leadership. Without the use of words, the use of images and symbols help portray the entire story. Improvisation is often connected with jazz bands and even comedy. However, improvisation is also important to leadership. “Improvisation is what allows leaders to respond to situations and opportunities as they occur with both sensitivity and a sense of shared

purpose and direction” (p. 133). In describing improvisation, the Denhardts examine three aspects (p. 115):

- Creativity within a particular structure;
- Fusion of creation and execution based on expertise and skill; and
- The evoking of and fueling by feelings and emotions.

It is important to remember that improvisation is not the same as chaos. A leader knows which bounds to stay within. Focus, passion, and discipline are among the most universal aspects of dedication for many people, whether it is about their professions, their hobbies, their families, or their faiths.

While the Denhardts dedicate the last chapter to “Learning the Art of Leadership,” they do not provide a step-by-step analysis to improving one’s leadership skills. Instead, they encourage one to learn the same way an artist learns—through practice. Much like a dancer improves his or her skills through studio work, the Denhardts suggest leaders can learn in a similar way, through 1) trial and error; 2) experimentation and the contingent nature of the work; 3) collaboration and mutuality; and 4) self-reflection and vulnerability.

The Denhardts’ book is not a how-to book on being a good leader. Nor does it provide any statistical data on how many leaders think these characteristics are important in their leadership style. What it does provide is a different perspective of leadership, enhanced through numerous accounts of how leaders and artists put these aspects of leadership into play every day.

*The Dance of Leadership* is also more an inspirational book than a teaching book. Its refreshing approach to leadership style will inspire many people to take a new look at their leadership experiences. It reminds the reader to refocus on the whole work of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel rather than the many brushstrokes that he made to create the final product. Anyone who has lived in the Phoenix area for several years can be influenced even more as many of the interviews—Lattie Coor, Bill Post, Judy Mohraz, for example—are from highly respected leaders right here in our community.

One concern surrounds the concept of “bad” leadership. Some scholars argue that only leaders striving for higher moral purposes can be seen as legitimate leaders (Burns, 1978). Yet, not all leadership literature agrees. Kellerman (2004) does not sharply delineate the roles of power, authority, and leadership. She argues “that there’s something odd about the idea that somehow leadership can be distinguished from coercion, as if leadership and power were unrelated” (p. 4). Taking Kellerman’s view, there can be a “bad” leader who can use rhythm, timing and imagery for purposes less moral than those of the leadership exemplars interviewed by the authors. However, the Denhardts do not address whether the characteristics they outline are present only in “good” leaders. Values are not absent from this book as the Denhardts note that “...leaders provide the assurance that we need to pursue important values” (p. 165). However, the place values have in leadership does lack the emphasis that is present

in other books by the Denhardts (see Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003; Denhardt, Denhardt and Aristigueta, 2002). Understanding their perspective on the relationship between values and leadership puts the book in a different context—one where leadership and good leadership are synonymous. Values are particularly important in the public sector. When discussing public leadership, Denhardt, Denhardt, and Aristigueta (2002) point out that “Leaders challenge and mobilize communities to face problems and tackle tough issues” (p. 207). In this way, some of the values that public leaders in the United States must uphold are the values of democracy, equality, justice and freedom.

“The leader provides clues, impressions, symbols, metaphors, interpretations as to the emotional engagement to which others might commit themselves in order to make a better future...[People] want to know that what they are doing will make a difference, that it will extend beyond the immediate moment and impact the future, hopefully in some positive way” (p. 156). The Denhardts remind the reader that an important part of being a leader is to inspire positive change. This book is well suited for those who want to leave a positive impact on the community. Whether it is in the public, private or nonprofit sector, we should all be able to take a kernel from this book and implement it into our lives. While it may be easier for those with an artistic bent, the book provides the encouragement for all of us to find the inner artist and apply this towards becoming a better leader.

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