

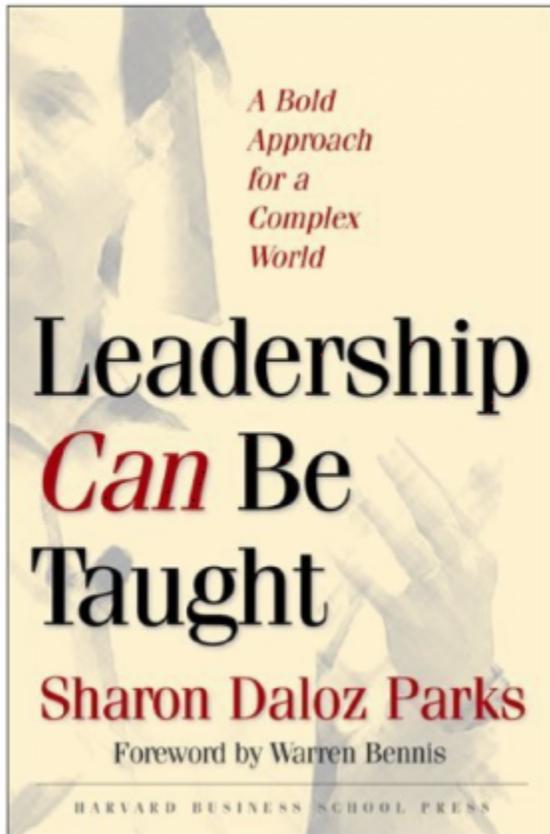
# A review of “Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World”

Written by Sharon Daloz Parks, published by Harvard University Press ISBN 1591393094 (2005)

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Ken Baskin

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## Introduction

The title of Sharon Daloz Parks's new book reduced me to my most sarcastic, dismissive self. *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*, it shouts at the reader, with all the shrillness of its italicized “Can.” So, directly after feeling insulted by the cover, I checked out Amazon.com, where I found searching books for ‘leadership’ yielded more than 18,000 titles, while ‘teaching leadership’ gave me access to more than 2,000. With all the books on the subject, I wondered, could Parks *really* have something new and interesting to tell me?

As my son would say, “My bad!” Parks’s book is a provocative read. It contains plenty to argue with, and I’ll get to some of it in a bit. But for anyone considering leadership from a complexity point of view, especially anyone considering *teaching* leadership, this book is worth the read. Even for people like me, who question whether it is possible to teach subjects such as leadership or ethics in a classroom, *Leadership Can Be Taught* kicks up a series of important issues surrounding what the book’s press release calls “a new story about what leadership means.” While I found myself arguing with the story Parks presents, I had to admit that the argument drove me to new conclusions, ones I hadn’t even vaguely anticipated.

The book is at its best examining the “case-in-point” technique for teaching leadership developed by Ronald Heifetz at Harvard’s Center for Public Leadership. With this technique, Heifetz treats the classroom as a laboratory in which students, who already have some leadership experience, learn to explore the class as a complex social system, understand the constraints of such systems, dissect their personal approaches to leadership, including especially their failures, and to reflect on the effects they have on their fellow students. Using his teaching as a model for the style of leadership he proposes (he calls it “adaptive

leadership”), Heifetz offers his students the opportunity to reflect on his leadership style and their own. In doing so, he enables them to learn as much as they choose to learn about the key capabilities of the adaptive leader — the capacity for self-knowledge, understanding of systems to be mobilized, radical honesty, self-observation and the ability to improvise. This is an enormously powerful methodology, and Parks presents a convincing case, including follow-up studies, that students do become significantly more capable leaders.

As valuable as Heifetz’s methodology may be, it still doesn’t answer the title’s implied question. Clearly, Heifetz’s class helps students learn to be *more effective* leaders. But the real thing, on-the-ground leadership, is something that can only be manifest in situations that demand leadership in action. This is not to minimize the teaching Parks discusses. For Heifetz teaches a series of important skills, including the abilities: to perceive oneself as part of an extensive human network and to respond with the knowledge of human networks that enables one to lead better; to be more open about one’s experience, including failure, so that it’s easier to learn from it and tolerate it in others; and to view one’s explanation of any situation as only one of many possible explanations of that situation. These are all important skills that enable anyone *to live* more effectively. I could even argue that these are the key personal skills needed to succeed in the world suggested in complexity thinking. Still, I can’t help think that Heifetz, a one-time psychotherapist, is offering his class members a largely therapeutic opportunity to experience themselves and the world more clearly, an extension of group therapy. That will, of course, make them *better* leaders, but something else is at play in whether they are effective as leaders in action.

Some readers may object that this is word splitting. Perhaps it is. At the same time, the failure to recognize this distinction between teaching leadership and teaching skills that make one a more capable leader/human being is symptomatic of Parks’s difficulties in exploring the ideas it provokes at more than a conventional level. Take, for instance, Parks’s ideas about the shift in our ‘paradigm’ of leadership from the hero to the artist. This is very much in the tradition of Bennis and Nanus (1985) discussion of the topic. For Kuhn (1962) a paradigm defines a field of study, providing its rules and limiting the type of problems to be solved. He uses the Copernican Revolution in Astronomy as the parade example of a paradigm shift. Yet, there is something very different between the paradigms of Astronomy and leadership. In Astronomy, it is the practitioner who uses the paradigm; in leadership, it is *not* the practitioner, but *the analyst of leadership* who uses the paradigm. As a result, I found the discussion of leadership paradigms somehow hollow. I wondered, for example, about the wide range of leadership styles that came to mind when I thought about great leaders — Hitler and Stalin, as well as Ghandi and Mandella, Henry Ford and Rockefeller, as well as IBM’s Tom Watson and 3M’s William L. Knight. Each of these men was shaped by specific circumstances and interactions. The rules and limits they observed were those dictated by their conditions. Any paradigm of leadership, then, is purely descriptive, rather than prescriptive, as in paradigms in science. It seemed to me, in fact, that leadership is more ... well ... complex than a “hero” or “artist” paradigm, which Parks identifies as the old and new paradigms, respectively, would allow.

As I pondered the difficulties of applying academic paradigms to the study of leadership, I began examining what complexity thinking suggests about it. First of all, leadership would appear to be a function of the interactions that are critical to the dynamics of any complex system. It’s helpful to think of these interactions in terms of Foucault’s microphysics of power. For Foucault society, in its pre-institutional form, consists of a complex network of individuals differentiated by their varying needs or responsibilities for exercising power. In this way, only a few people come to possess the power to lead, educate, and guide (whether in political, economic, intellectual or spiritual manners), while most people welcome others exercising it, as long as it is not abused (See Baskin, 2006; Foucault, 1978). This field of relational power (Deleuze, 1986) is further modified as new knowledge infuses society. From this point of view, leadership emerges as people seek power or have it thrust on them, thus Abigail Adam’s comment, “Great necessities call forth great leaders.” Leadership, then, is not so much a personal quality as it is a quality that becomes manifest in relationship, in specific interactions in specific historical circumstances.

Such a view suggests that any ‘paradigm’, as used in conventional discussions of leadership, is misleadingly constraining. Rather, the behavior of any leader will reflect the time and culture he or she arises in, the accidents of his/her personality, and the power relationships of those he/she is called on to lead. Stalin controlled and terrified his followers; Gandhi led with a combination of moral example and political pressure that is difficult to imagine in the West; William L. Knight made 3M a great company by encouraging the creative entrepreneurialism of those who worked for him. From this point of view, leadership *cannot* be taught, but must emerge from the conditions in which it arises.

Perhaps it is unfair to expect (or even hope for) this kind of thinking from a book like Parks’s. For, while she hints at a sense of such principles as emergence and social phase transition, she appears to be unfamiliar with complexity thinking, avoiding any substantial discussion of its principles. Moreover, the purpose of this book is not to examine leadership with new eyes, and the chapter on the paradigm shift seems more an appendix than an integral part of the book. When examining her central purpose in this book, the teaching methodology of Heifetz, Parks gives us much to think about, an object lesson in how to teach the skills of a subject that, in itself, may be unteachable.

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