



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

By Stephen Preskill & Stephen D. Brookfield; Jossey-Bass, San Francisco (2009)

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Reviewing this book came at an opportune time. I have followed Stephen Brookfield's academic career since the mid eighties when I was a student in the AEGIS program at Teachers College and have used his works not only in my teaching but also in my practice as an adult educator. I was also preparing to co-teach a new doctoral level seminar on leadership in higher education. So it was with great interest that I picked up his new collaboration with Stephen Preskill focused on leadership and learning. Preskill and Brookfield bring a very important perspective that I find missing in much of the leadership literature: a focus on collaboration, community building and the importance of the narrative. As the title of their work proposes, we cannot lead if we are not engaged in learning. The learning in this case is very specific from stories of men and women who spent their lives in struggles for social justice. While some may not be household names, or our stereotypical leader in today's media blitz and political world, they all have in common the core values Preskill and Brookfield urge us to consider.

Preskill and Brookfield introduce us perhaps in many new ways, to nine leaders and activists who they consider learning leaders and exemplify the core values in their leadership model. They have chosen Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Jane Addams, Paul Robeson, Aldo Leopold, Mary Parker Follett, Cesar Chavez, Nelson Mandela, and Myles Horton. While some may be familiar to the reader, each of these learning leaders is presented in a new light within the context of nine learning tasks.

The essence of the authors' idea is that learning is at the center of leadership, with you, the leader, "being open to learning from the people around you and letting them see how crucial this is for your own practice and development." Drawing on five models of leadership: transformational, symbiotic, developmental, servant and organic, Preskill and Brookfield explain how themes from these models appear over and over again in the lives of the leaders they introduce to us throughout the book. From this analysis Preskill and Brookfield present nine learning tasks of leadership:

- Learning how to be open to the contributions of others
- Learning how to reflect critically on one's practice
- Learning how to support the growth of others
- Learning how to develop collective leadership
- Learning how to analyze experience
- Learning how to question oneself and others
- Learning democracy
- Learning to sustain hope in the face of struggle
- Learning to create community.

These nine tasks form the body of the book, each one a chapter. The chapters first provide an overview of how leaders place learning at the center of their practice. Each chapter offers the story of a leader who embodies the learning task. This format provides leadership theory, examples of social justice struggles, concrete realities of leadership challenges, and each leader's own way of demonstrating the learning task explained in the chapter.

What I like most about this book is the way Preskill and Brookfield model their own ideas about narrative, listening and being open to the contributions of others. They are good story tellers and have the ability to bring the personality and essence of their leaders to the reader. More than a book about leadership, and there are so many of them available to us, this book is about how nine women and men live (or lived) out their values, strive for, not their success, but others growth, working “to remove the barriers and clear the pathways for each person to make the most of her or his talents.” Their stories include barriers, struggles, and ethical dilemmas. They also include the lure of leadership power, and the strength of knowing your own core values within the context of community.

Critical reflection has been a constant in Brookfield’s writing, one of the main learnings I took away from my own doctoral work with him. This book once again makes clear the need for this task to not only support us in our personal and professional lives, but also as necessity of moral and ethical leadership. For many of us who have been frustrated these past few years with those in leadership positions, this book provides stories of leaders who put others first, who listen, collaborate and value democracy. It is both a thought provoking book and a practical guide. It gives models, but urges us to reflect and analyze our own experiences. It is definitely grounded in adult learning principles, and pushes the limits of our current thinking. I will definitely introduce this model, Preskill and Brookfield’s ideas, to my doctoral students this fall. How could I not?