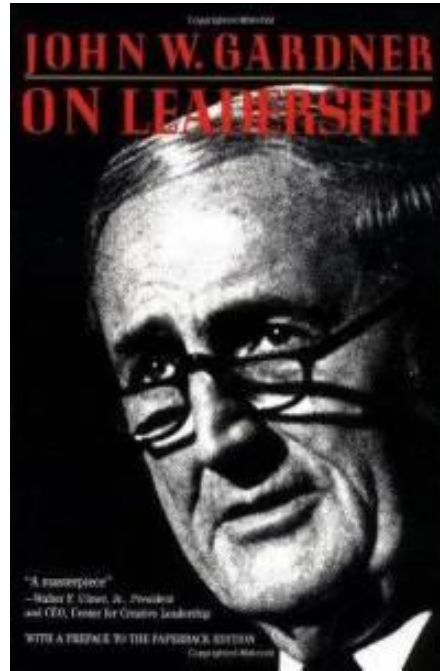


Executive Book Summary

John W. Gardner



On Leadership

By
Muhammad Mustafa Mustaan

Brief Summary

One of the characteristics of a leader is to be a storyteller, walking you through, connecting your imaginations with his experiences and visualizing the scenario for you to understand the story in all means. Such is John W. Gardner in his *On Leadership* book, where he tells you not just theories, but also experimental stories from his personal experiences. Anything included in this book has been what he has first experimented and demonstrated as working models during his ministerial responsibilities in Health, Education and Welfare under US President Lyndon Johnson, where he not only introduced Medicare bringing quality health care for senior citizens, but also supervised the revision of Elementary and Secondary Education Act, facilitating and funding poor students federally and his leading role in Common Cause. *On Leadership*, points at Gardner's ability on how to divert attention towards the main roles of the leaders. I, as a student of public administration with a background of political science studies as well as involvement in the public sector (in the past) and leading some social economy organizations (presently), found this book very interesting and it helped me understand what the leaders and presidents go through before making their decisions public. *On Leadership* is a remarkable piece of writing worth studying by any leader, manager, follower, and those interested in studying this field, in other words, everyone.

Definitions

1. Leadership:

What Gardner believes of leadership is quite apparent through this analysis of the nature of leadership, "...the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leaders and their followers." By describing the terms such as envisioning goals, affirming and regenerating the values, motivating, managing, serving as symbol, representing the group and achieving workable unity, Gardner tries to shed some light and outline the overarching tasks of a leader.

2. Followership:

Gardner refers the term "Follower" as passive. He believes it indicates to a sense of dependency that he recommends to be replaced with "Constituent" instead, where he believes by doing this the leaders can draw their followers closer to himself and attaining the goals he has set. The most interesting thing is his distinctions between failures of leadership and followership.

Three main concepts that Gardner tries to present are; constituents, establishing a dialogue between leaders and constituents and empowering the constituents.

Framing theories

Written in 1990, Gardner through *On Leadership* provides great insight about leadership well before of its time and it frames the understanding of leaders coming after him. By saying, "*It is not my purpose*

to deal with either leadership or its related subjects comprehensively. I hope to illuminate aspects of the subject that may be of use in facing our present dilemmas – as a society and as a species”, (John W. Gardner, 1990). This framing includes detailing 10 elements needed for successful leaders including *Contextual environment, levels of power, leader-constituent relationship, community perspective and much more* with a full view on each by giving relevant examples. Each chapter flows to the following one in a fashion to give the reader an idea about its direction. As a reader one can find a framework, where many details on leadership and its ways of effectiveness leads to what Gardner has learnt during his leading careers.

Elements of the Book

- *The Nature of Leadership*

Gardner begins his book with the first chapter by discussing *the nature of leadership*, to set the stage. He explains how the information is *“focused on the here and now”*, (John W. Gardner, 1990), and how this information could be different if he was writing his book in a different time. In the first chapter, the reader already gets familiar with the way the book flows and what language the author uses for drawing these pictures.
- The Tasks of Leadership*

There are nine main tasks of a leader that Gardner refers to them as *“the most significant functions of leadership”*, (John W. Gardner, 1990). The tasks that he focuses on are *envisioning goals, affirming values, motivating, managing, achieving workable unity, explaining, serving as a symbol, representing the group and renewing*. In addition, as expected, he then provides a clearer picture through bringing examples about each of these tasks.
- The Hearth of the Matter: Leader-Constituent Interaction*

“The relationship between leaders and followers varies from one culture to another. This chapter deals chiefly with the interaction as it occurs in the mainstream of American life”, (John W. Gardner, 1990). This statement points at the primary focus Gardner puts on the relationship between the leader and the follower and the different roles they play. The structure of this relationship includes many other extremely important elements that are investigated by Gardner.
- Contexts*

Gardner considers contextual situations as an important factor for shaping and making the leadership performances. He says that he will *“show through a number of examples how context and attributes come together to produce leadership performances”* (John W. Gardner, 1990). The examples illustrate his points very well regarding the contextual situations.
- Attributes*

Gardner lists 14 attributes that he believes are essential for effective leadership. He says; *“the attributes that follow are not present in every leader. The importance of the attribute to*

effective leadership varies with the situation", (John W. Gardner, 1990). The attributes he lists may vary from the ones in readers' minds. However, it gives an opportunity to understand all these attributes in case of readers' adding to or shortening this list.

6. *Power*

One of Gardner's great emphasis is on how to distinguish between leadership and power, as both are two different things. He puts a lot of details in how to differentiate between them and how they intermingle.

The Moral Dimension

The way Gardner is presenting the moral dimensions is like of a paramount to facilitate the understanding of leader-constituent relationship. Gardner states that "*reflected in the following discussion are the values of this society at this moment in history, as seen through the eyes of one observer*" (John W. Gardner, 1990), which indicates how he considers all those elements including morality in the society. To better explain this relationship, he mentions the terms such as individual vs. group; law, custom and belief; human possibilities; individual initiative and responsibilities, and how they play a role in the context of morality.

One of the many fascinating things that Gardner points out is mentioning about those who always just pray for the day to finally solve their problems. Instead, he advises to pray for the freedom to continue working to solve the problems that will never stop coming our way.

7. *Large-Scale Organized Systems*

Gardner discusses about the problems of different nature that happens within large-scale system that can challenge a leader and his efficiencies. He then suggests on how should a leader deal with these problems through the use of communication, media and motivation. "*Leaders must understand not only the complicated patterns of their own segment but also the working of neighboring segments*", (John W. Gardner, 1990), and he emphasises on how it can happen in a large-scale organized system working on a common good. Representing the "Common Cause" organization for decades, "*A society in which pluralism is not undergirded by shared values and held together by a measure of mutual trust simply cannot survive*", and "*Leaders unwilling to seek mutually workable arrangements with systems external to their own are not serving the long term interests of their constituents*", (John W. Gardner, 1990).

8. *Fragmentation and the Common Good*

This chapter emphasizes on how can many systems weave together. He says that, "*We have many leadership pyramids. The leaders in the various pyramids do not all know each other – or want to*", (John W. Gardner, 1990). One of the many emphasis he puts is the issue of pluralism and its importance for achieving the common good of the people, organizations and the world.

9. *The Knitting Together*

Gardner highlights how important it is to bring everything together. This, in his view, is only possible through the use of networking, resolving conflicts and coalition building. Moreover, to

support this, he provides multiple examples to explain how important and useful these elements are in influencing your way out, especially within politics.

10. *Community*

Gardner says that, *“In some measure, what we think of as a failure of leadership on the contemporary scene may be traceable to a breakdown in the sense of community”*, (John W. Gardner, 1990). It indicates that community, for Gardner, is the foundation of success and thus building and maintaining it is one of the main goals of a leader, as he says, *“Failure of leadership may be traceable to a breakdown in the sense of community”*, (John W. Gardner, 1990). Thus, he lists the ingredients for constructing, nurturing, and maintaining the community, and most importantly, teaching the skills of how to build and rebuild the community for its essential importance to keep a leader effective.

11. *Renewing*

Gardner focuses on how the continuous systems’ renewal is an essential task of the leadership, because rigid or complacent behaviours, rusted or abandoned values, forgotten goals, old-fashioned procedures and habits bring the best of communities to its knees. He then carefully analyzes the processes for maturity, steps towards renewal, continuity and change, the trance of nonrenewal, and needs of renewal for a leader to easily lead his constituents to achieve the common goal. The steps towards renewal that he emphasises on include, *reassessment, motivation, pluralism/alternatives/dissent, communication, touch the earth, science, reorganization, visible future and greater detail of the leader’s need for renewal*. One more thing that Gardner adds to the list of tasks of leaders is the *renewal of culture*, and *release of talent and energy* and considers it as keys to renewal.

12. *Sharing Leadership Tasks*

Gardner believes that leaders are unable to do each and every task required for the effective functionality of an organization, including all of abovementioned tasks. Gardner therefore believes that to achieve success, a leader must share even some of leadership responsibilities with his team. He notes that it is important to understand that the constituents have the key role within the various organizations and how to bring their contributions through working as a team.

13. *Leadership Development: The Early Years*

Gardner notes that in today’s world a leader cannot be a specialists but a generalist. Therefore, through an educational system we can help the young leaders be prepared with this fact. He states that, *“At college level, the best preparation is a liberal arts education”*, (John W. Gardner, 1990).

14. *Leadership Development: Lifelong Growth*

Much of Gardiner’s emphasis is focused on the leadership development that he is very clear about by using the clause *“Outside the Classroom”*, meaning a lifelong growth where leaders need followers (constituents) that are all found outside of a lecture hall. He says that, *“We cannot design an assessment procedure that yields a leadership aptitude score that is adequately predictive at age twenty or thirty. Nor can we expect our graduate and*

professional schools to send their graduates out with their future greatness prepackaged” (John W. Gardner, 1990). He points to the fact that leadership develops overtime and is a lifelong learning process. It is all about finding the ways of how to motivate one’s self and the people to avoid losing any loss of followers. In other words, a leader has to understand what “*walk the talk*” stands for and how essential it is for catalyzing and motivating the followers.

15. *Motivation*

For a leader, motivation is a key. By giving several examples, Gardner explains how learning of ways of motivating your constituents is important for them to walk down on your path.

16. *The Release of Human Possibilities*

“When faith is present in the leader, it communicates to followers with powerful effect. In the conventional mode people want to know whether the followers believe in the leader; a more searching question is whether the leader believes in the followers.” (John W. Gardner, 1990). What I get from the above statement is that, John Gardner’s goal is *the release of human possibilities*, which requires positive attitudes with a hard-headed optimism towards the future, delivered with confidence, great expectations, even if the reality really forces you towards otherwise, and he still is ready and has the strength to act.

Distinctions

One of the main part of this book is defining the distinctions amongst terminologies and the contexts, that are:

1. **Historical**

People always compare the current leaders with their predecessors and are watchful of their actions all the time.

2. **Social Accountability:**

In some societies, leaders face some constraints due to the social structure. Gardner gives the example of the US president as though in charge of affairs, but still has to be accountable to the congress.

3. **Atmosphere:**

The role of physical environment surrounding the leader has been considered influential over the nature of a leader, as it varies in each organization, city or country.

4. **Status:**

Normally people assume that those with higher status in society or an organization can be good leaders, however, Gardner points out that it is not necessary that such can be true, as this does not guarantee their leadership capabilities, though it gives them an opportunity to attain such position quicker than others.

5. **Power:**

Though power facilitates a leader to move his constituents together with him forward. However,

Gardner emphasises that it does not mean that anyone with the power of wealth, or the power to harm, or military power is a leader.

6. Authority:

By mentioning the cases of police officers, tax auditors etc. Gardner, distinguishes the difference of an authority of a leader from of those who have legitimized authority over you, however, this does not make them leaders.

Critiques of the book:

I personally liked this book for its focus on the politics and work of leaders mainly in public sector. However, in my opinion not everyone is capable or interested in understanding what the presidents go through on daily basis and why because of their surroundings. People of North America would not be good audience for what Gardner discusses due to their lack of interest in politics. However, this book can attract politicians and those in leading positions.

In addition, *On Leadership* is not for an academic environment either. Saying that, I don't mean this book cannot be used by academia. However, I believe it is a manual for leaders and those interested in learning leadership to deal with their day-to-day functionalities or planning to go for any of such positions. Therefore, if academia is planning to use this book as part of their curriculum, it could be used for a workshop type courses, where students are trained based on this manual.
