

On Leadership by John W. Gardner An Executive Book Summary

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Brief Summary of Book

John W. Gardner certainly carries credentials into this book, because everything that he includes was modeled and demonstrated during his tenure as Health, Education and Welfare minister in the U.S.A. under President Lyndon Johnson. He helped to introduce Medicare in the States, as well as revised the American version of the Education Act. His ability to command attention comes through with authority throughout this entire book. Even though it is very laborious at times, it is due to necessity of defining exactly what leadership should look like, as well as giving historical examples to back up his assertions. Since I am very interested in politics, his in-depth knowledge of the American government kept me reading. By drawing upon examples of past American presidents, he gives the reader a glimpse of what the public never got to see. Presidential leadership is often carried out behind closed doors, and the public only sees the final decision.

Critique of the Book

That being said, there are many reasons why this is not a very useful teaching tool. Despite its effectiveness in defining the parameters for leadership at an administrative level, there are very few things that a classroom teacher could practically take directly into the classroom. This is not to say that leadership skills cannot be taught or introduced to high school students, but that the format he has outlined is not focused on that demographic. He does touch on how to begin teaching leadership practices to students (something I will discuss later), but it is not substantial enough to begin without the use of

other major resources. I would say that this book belongs in a Masters course, for those teachers who want to pursue administrative positions in the future. As a first year teacher, there are many things that will be useful to me for understanding fellow staff and parents, but not for organizing my own classroom and the different energies within it. The most applicable way to use this information as I head into my career would be how I work with my department members. I will have weekly meetings with the English Department and can utilize several of these skills in order to promote a higher level of efficiency for those meetings.



(Time Magazine, January 20, 1967)

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Definition of Leadership

What Leadership is not

Gardner begins the book by defining leadership, since it is a word that has been used as a catchall for any position of importance. He repeatedly enforces the fact that leadership is not (1990, p. 1-3):

1. Apart from historical context Leaders will be compared to previous leaders that held similar positions in the past.	2. Apart from social setting Leaders are constrained by the social environment. A President may be in charge, but still answers to Congress.	3. Apart from the system it presides over The physical environment (often the city or state) influences the nature of leadership.
4. Status Higher status does not guarantee leadership ability. However, it does give opportunity for it.	5. Power Many people have power over you via money, the capacity to injure you, and even a military dictator. This does not necessitate leadership.	6. Official Authority Authority is legitimized power, but many people have power over you in different situations e.g. police officer; tax auditor; professor.

What Leadership is

It is important that Gardner sets up the context of what leadership is not because it immediately gets rid of incorrect, preconceived notions that the reader may have. His six points are simple, yet effective in getting the message across that no one inherits leadership due to status, power, or wealth. Leadership is gradually acquired, which is encouraging for an educational context in which teachers want to develop student leaders. Gardner then goes on to define leadership in his own words:

Definition: “Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers” (Gardner, 1990, p.1).

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The Different Tasks of Leadership (p. 11)

- A. Envisioning Goals: Being able to point in the right direction.
- B. Affirming Values: Creating a community that holds the same values and core beliefs.
- C. Regeneration of Values: The group must rediscover the living elements in its own tradition and adapt them to present realities.
- D. Motivating
- E. Managing: Planning and priority setting; organizing and institution building; keeping the system functioning; agenda setting and decision making
- F. Fostering Workable Unity: Each piece of the body performs a specific part. Learning to trust those parts to do their jobs.
- G. Explaining: Leaders find the words.
- H. Serving as a Symbol: However the leader reacts signifies the overall feeling of the group.
- I. Representing the Group: Negotiating on behalf of the group, and defending institutional integrity. This is where the teacher defends the profession.
- J. Renewing: They do not need to be renewers, but need to promote it.

Gardner argues that being a leader is different than the title of a manager, someone who is in charge but may not organize and govern effectively. He outlines [six major ways that leaders differentiate from the title of a manager](#) (1990, p. 4):

1. They think long term
2. They grasp the context in which their unit exists: Understands the relationship between their group and larger areas of society and that market
3. They reach and influence citizens outside of their jurisdiction and boundaries
4. Place heavy emphasis on intangibles such as vision, values, and motivation
5. They have the skill to cope with conflicting viewpoints and influences
6. They think in terms of renewal: “Lifelong learning”

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Once Gardner makes those stipulations, he gives several clarifications to the reader regarding the [nature of effective leadership](#):

- Leaders **change their leadership styles over time**. Simply because they are effective using one style early in their careers does not mean that the style should never be changed or adapted (p. 9)
- High level leaders will be more effective in every way if the systems over which they preside are made vital by **dispersed leadership**. Recognizing the talent within your own reserves and utilizing it allows for more productivity and growth. This does not replace the head leader, but tries to limit how far that leader is “stretched” (p. 9).
- Leaders necessarily **have some level of power**, and need to be **focused on how to use it effectively**. There is nothing wrong with a leader “obsessing” over power. The clichéd phrase that says, “with great power comes great responsibility” holds true here. The example given accurately describes this need. “To say a leader is preoccupied with power is like saying that a tennis player is preoccupied with making shots an opponent cannot return. Of course leaders are preoccupied with power! The significant questions are: What means do they use to gain it? How do they exercise it? To what ends do they exercise it?” (p. 57)
- Good leaders **need to be held to a certain moral standard** (p. 67). Many leaders can be effective, but evil. The main example given is Hitler, whom was an amazing leader but horrible as the result of his “moral compass.”
- Leaders must be **experienced and proficient at resolving conflicts**, being able to generate alternative solutions and find common ground that pursues mutual advantage for all sides (p. 105).
- “Leaders are **community builders** because they have to be” (p. 113). If they cannot find shared values within their constituency, leadership is not possible.

After several chapters that reinforce the previous points, Gardner comes to an idea that is advocated completely by the U of S College of Education. The one idea that this college is very effective at promoting is that continuous renewal in teaching practices is necessary. Everyone has experienced a teacher who has done the same lesson plans for the last 20 years. This is where the job becomes stagnant, and can even be detrimental to the students. Gardner very eloquently lists the [purpose of constant renewal](#) (p. 122):

- To renew and reinterpret values that have been tainted by hypocrisy and cynicism. This can be seen in the staffroom on a daily basis. It is under the professional code of ethics that teachers are not to discuss individual students in the staffroom, and yet we hear it every day.
- To free up energy that is constrained due to outdated practices
- To re-focus on forgotten goals or generate new ones
- To achieve new understanding (knowledge base) that leads to new solutions

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- To foster the release of human possibilities through education and lifelong growth

To touch on that last point, the release of human potential is of the utmost importance. Often, leaders will be so focused on their own abilities that they overlook untapped potential right in front of them. An effective leader needs to recognize potential, or skill, and begin to invest in it.

Leadership Development in Students

There have been no successful findings regarding the correlation between certain skills that are to young children and their resulting leadership skills. This is not to say that you cannot teach a child to be a leader, but that it still requires a certain amount of “luck” (luck used in the sense of unpredictability as to how a student will react to what is taught). Gardner argues that the best possible way is to promote early leadership is to offer “promising young people opportunities and challenges favorable to the flowering of whatever leadership gifts they may have” (p. 158). To simplify that, we need to recognize skills and foster them early. It seems simple, and yet most human talent remains undeveloped. The more we allow students to grow in their strengths and passions, the more likely they are to become goal-oriented leaders.