

Rethinking Leadership

Dr Donna Ladkin

Steve Macaulay

Today we are going to explore the topic of leadership; and in particular we are going to look at rethinking leadership.

Joining me in the studio today is Donna Ladkin. Now, Donna, you have just written a book on *Rethinking Leadership*; why on earth do we need to rethink leadership, after all we have got plenty of examples where leaders are leading?

Donna Ladkin

Yes, that is a very good question. One of the reasons that I wrote the book is that although, yes, this topic has been studied for hundreds of years, literally, we are still asking questions like what is leadership? And we also know that in different contexts, leadership looks very different.

And so one of the things that I have done with this book is look at leadership from the perspective of different questions, so I have applied different questions to this topic of leadership rather than asking the old chestnut what is leadership – which basically we still haven't come up with a good answer for.

I have posed questions like what is leadership for? I have posed questions about what happens between leaders and followers in the leadership dynamic? What happens in a particular context in terms of the way people understand that context, which mean that in order to be effective a leader might try different things.

So for instance, whereas sometimes a leader's vision is really important, in other contexts being able to understand what is happening here and now and to have a real perspective on that is more important.

Sometimes, of course, it is very important for leaders to be able to provide some answers, but at other times being able to ask the question is key.

So what the book does is it turns on its head a lot of assumptions that we have about leadership and it asks different questions because through doing that, we can then get different ideas for ways in which we might enact leadership.

Steve Macaulay

So let's look at the implications of that both for leaders and for organisations. What would you see that is?

Donna Ladkin

The implications both for leaders and organisations – well, for leaders it is very much about first of all looking at the assumptions that underpin how they might take up the leader role and to just question that. A lot of people get hung up with the idea that to be a leader I need to have all of the right answers. And it is actually to

question that and to think well, in today's complex world, there is no way that any individual can have all of the answers. So it is about being able to come up with the right questions – that is really important. Being able to, kind of check one's assumptions about what it is you are trying to achieve through leadership. Are you trying to actually get to point that you can define or, more likely in today's context, you are trying to hold a process as it emerges. Because so much of where we are trying to get to today, we can't see – we can't actually know the end point. We have to be able to hold a process as it emerges.

So it is about thinking about these contexts that we are in and how one might best apply oneself to them.

Steve Macaulay

So if we were to say leadership is about thinking, but it is also about doing, what would you say is the doing part of that?

Donna Ladkin

It is about thinking and it is about doing. But it is about doing in a considered way. It is about doing which is not necessarily falling back on one's old assumptions about what needs to be done – I need to get on my white stallion and save the day. It is about doing something different; because I think that is very much at the heart of the idea of leadership that I am working with. That leadership, because it is always moving people forward – I mean, that is the one of the things in my definition of leadership, if you don't achieve some kind of mobilisation, it probably isn't leadership. And by necessity you are moving people forward into something that is unknown. So because of that, you need a different kind of approach; you won't see where the end goal is, you need to be able to work with how things emerge.

Steve Macaulay

That is very challenging; thank you very much.

Donna Ladkin

It is, thank you.