

Book Review

The Powers to Lead

Joseph S. Nye Jr.

(Oxford University Press, 226 pp., \$21.95)

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In *The Powers to Lead*, Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2008) presents a primer in leadership studies that examines the evolution of leadership theory and practice. He uses examples of political, social, and business leaders to illustrate various leadership styles, and he invites the reader to reconsider some accepted wisdom about leadership by introducing new approaches. Nye argues that a new understanding of power, contextual intelligence, and the objectives and styles of leadership are required for modern democratic organizations. Unfortunately, the brevity of his book means that many meaningful topics are given short shrift.

Nye asserts that much of the conventional understanding of leadership must change. He rejects the historical leadership model, based on the heroic, “alpha-male” approach, that emphasized military power. Nye also challenges the “traits-centered” approach to leadership, which holds that leaders, possessing certain innate characteristics, are born and not made. Instead, he invites the reader to think of leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers, as each is conditioned by their respective contexts.

As our understanding of leadership changes, so too should our conceptualization of power. Nye discusses the distinctions and connections between “hard power” and “soft power.” While hard power relies on con-

trolling followers through rewards and intimidation, soft power involves a leader's ability to inspire others. Although Nye is credited with coining the term soft power (Hertzberg 2009), he does not believe that this type of power alone is sufficient. Instead, Nye maintains that a synthesis of hard and soft power—what he calls “smart power”—is usually needed to be effective.

Nye concentrates his analysis on the types of leaders needed for modern democratic organizations and societies. To this end, he considers two leadership paradigms: neocharismatic and transformational. Theorists have conflicting views about what constitutes charisma and its relationship to a leader. Does charisma come from the leader? Is it projected onto a leader by his or her followers, or is it derived from the context in which the leader serves? Nye does little to shed light on the confusion generated by these models.

Nye does a better job of critiquing and expanding upon transactional and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership relies on specific means—reward, punishment, and other personal motives—to motivate followers toward the leader's goals. Nye argues that transformational leadership is more ambiguous, as it has been used to describe both means and ends. Thus, leaders can use either transformational or transactional methods to achieve transformational goals. Nye uses Lyndon Johnson's success in passing the *Civil Rights Act of 1957* as an example: as a senator, Johnson used bullying and bargaining tactics to coerce his colleagues to vote for a bill that transformed African American civil rights in the United States. While his techniques were clearly transactional, the result was transformational.

To clarify the nomenclature, Nye suggests using the term “transformational” when referring to leaders' goals and objectives and the term “transforming,” coined by James MacGregor Burns, to describe transformational methods and their effect on followers. A leader's style should be described by how he or she uses soft and hard power skills. In addition to examining various leadership styles, Nye maintains that successful leaders need to possess three critical soft power skills—communication, vision, and emotional intelligence—and two transactional hard power skills—organizational ability and political acumen.

The interplay between hard and soft power and transactional and transformational leadership leads to Nye's insights on "contextual intelligence." Contextual leadership is the ability to determine the best combination of hard and soft power skills in varying situations. Nye writes that contextual intelligence combines cognitive abilities with the emotional intelligence that often comes from experience. It requires that leaders be flexible and willing to adapt their style to the situation and the needs of various stakeholders. Although there are a variety of contexts in which a leader must work, Nye considers five important dimensions of contextual intelligence: culture, distribution of power, the needs and demands of followers, crisis and time urgency, and the flow of information.

Contextual intelligence, the idea that leaders must understand and adapt according to the followers and in the context in which they work, exposes the common fallacy that an effective leader in one domain will be equally competent in virtually any area. Nye presents cases in which leaders have difficulty transferring their skills between disparate cultural situations, such as the worlds of private and public administration. However, deficiencies in contextual intelligence can also surface when a leader moves between institutions that appear similar. To illustrate, Nye notes that James Webb, who succeeded as director of the Bureau of Budget under Harry Truman, was ineffective when assigned to the State Department, but subsequently excelled as the director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. This example, along with others that Nye underscores, demonstrates that contextual intelligence is a nuanced and complex skill.

Nye exposes the difficulty of defining "good" leaders, since the word "good," in this regard, has been used to describe both ethical and effective leadership. He suggests that it is more accurate to compare and contrast both the ethics and the effectiveness of a leader. "Bad" leaders, on the other hand, can be characterized by a variety of traits including incompetence, rigidity, intemperance, and ethical lapses. Nye discusses the many contradictions and questions surrounding a leader's private and public morality, and points to the wisdom of Madisonian government, which created institutions that gave voice to those who disagreed with a leader. Good leaders are not only appropriately restrained by these institutions but are also respon-

sible for creating and maintaining systems that promote high standards of ethics and efficacy. At the same time, Nye does not discount the unique characteristics of inspirational leaders who can teach others to think beyond established groups. Nye points to the example of Nelson Mandela, who, rather than becoming the leader of black South Africans, used his position to lead *all* South Africans to a united future.

As Nye notes in his preface, he decided to write this book when he discovered that no good primers existed for the modern leadership studies course he was to teach. He also recognized that much of the language about leadership was convoluted and misused. Nye succeeds at creating a clear and coherent text for the novice leadership student. He uses easily accessible language and unambiguous examples to highlight his points.

In addition to serving as an introduction to the study of leadership, Nye's work encourages one to consider leadership beyond simplified dichotomies. It is not always more ethical or effective to use soft power, and transactional and transformational leadership are not mutually exclusive leadership styles. The recent popularity of the term "smart power" demonstrates the desire of many concerned with leadership to move beyond the limited options of traditional leadership language (Hertzberg 2009).

Unfortunately, as a broad overview of many leadership ideas, Nye's work is only able to briefly describe numerous important concepts. One area that deserves further consideration is how to effectively teach leadership. As Nye firmly asserts, there is real value in leadership studies. However, he does not explore how to teach or acquire valuable leadership skills, such as emotional intelligence or vision. Additionally, he maintains that most people are middle-level leaders who are capable of innovation but who, at the same time, must remain aware of their position in the organization. Nye, does not, however, provide practical advice for maintaining this delicate balance.

Overall, both the neophyte and the seasoned leadership studies scholar can benefit from Nye's book. His discussions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi demonstrate that we have always had good leaders among us and that certain aspects of leadership are timeless. At the same

time, he exposes the changing nature of power and leadership and invites the reader to consider the skills and methods required for leading modern democratic organizations.

References

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