

Host: Six new roles of engagement for teams, organisations, communities and movements

Mark McKergow and Helen Bailey

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Review by Svea van der Hoorn

Mark McKergow and Helen Bailey have co-authored a book which introduces a different word, and adds a fresh angle to the fraught and ever evolving debate about what leadership is and isn't, whether it can be grown and, if so, how?

Wisely, it does not attempt to take a position and then build an argument supporting that position. Instead it questions, explores and provides a diversity of stories. In this way it respects that readers will have minds of their own and opinions on the topic of leading, and invites expansion rather than narrowing of perspective on what leading looks like, how it shows up, and how those interested in leading well might go about leading with the host metaphor as their guiding principle. Most impressive is the way this book invites readers into a language spruce-up which can start far-reaching ripples and create significant effects.

What are some of the features of this book that impressed me?

- It surfaces assumptions about leadership and highlights leading as an interactional activity. While this may seem quite obvious, many books on leading oscillate their focus between the role of the leader and that of the followers, never quite diving fully into the world of the interactions between them as the central and essential focus. This is demonstrated in the book not following the usual path of focusing on how to lead followers, with instead a focus on what activates and maintains engagement between and by people.

- It addresses paradox as a feature of hosting and in this way is similar to Ben Horowitz's "The hard thing about hard things: building a business when there are not easy answers". I enjoyed the respect and dignity the authors demonstrate to their readers by kindling readers' own thinking and talking about what is offered by this book, rather than sliding into the usual how-to cookbook style of so many books about leading. I caught many glimpses of Wittgenstein's and Bateson's stance of wanting their writing to inspire readers to thoughts of their own. As I sometimes say, "I should not like my writing to spare myself or other people the trouble of thinking and living. Rather if possible I should like them to be stimulated and inspired to further thoughts and experiences of their own".
- Wicked problems get airtime early on, which is reassuring, given the tendency to believe that all problems can be solved, side-stepped or tamed. This opens the space for the authors to move beyond the territory of board-rooms, business situations and formal organisations, into the landscape of community and movements. This breadth of context may be of particular interest to those working in the NGO sector, the public service sector or from a political activist and advocacy space. It also provides an excellent bridge for the many initiatives which are attempting to grow leading capability by twinning business leaders with civil society and public sector leaders, for example CEOs with school principals. Similarly it speaks to those wishing to bridge from anti-establishment activism into corporate life.
- It tackles the issue of power transparently. It proposes that "invitation is connected strongly with soft power and influence, the outstretched hand of welcome. Stepping forward to invite is coupled with stepping back to offer choice for the guests – to accept or not. This space and choice is what helps to produce commitment and involvement for those inspired". In the chapter on the Inviter role the topic of the relevance and wisdom of

the use of authority is explored, and even visually displayed in the matrix format so beloved of management and leadership texts!

- It is gender, class and culture sensitive while maintaining energy and a sense of quiet authority. This makes the roles described and illustrated with stories attractive, relevant and possible to experiment with by a wide diversity of people in a broad range of contexts. And it does so while inviting us to maintain our sense of identity and context-specific focus rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

So what does this book offer that gave rise to my impressions?

In the authors' words: "The metaphor – described in this book – is the first part of the story. The second part is your own experience. This book is a jumping-off point for expanding and building on that experience. We have done a lot of the work in putting the material together, and now we want to help you finish your particular copy by connecting ideas and stories here with your own situation and knowledge."

They structure the book around 6 roles and 4 positions. And I began to hope that I was not about to embark on yet another matrix, albeit it more complicated than the more usual 4 x 4 or 3 x 3, rather than the exploratory invitation the authors had promised. And I experienced that for those who find comfort in structure and order, it is provided – subtly. For those who like to co-create and develop emergent meaning, this too is enabled, largely through the writing style and the many thought-provoking quotes, diversity of perspectives, and stories from everyday experiences.

Chapter 5 focuses on the four positions: in the spotlight, with the guests, in the gallery, in the kitchen, and then provides descriptions of these roles in action in the everyday world. The chapter ends with reflective questions inviting us to begin the process of bridging from the world of this book into the world we engage with day to day.

The bulk of the book is devoted to chapters on the six roles – initiator, inviter, space creator, gatekeeper, connector and

co-participator. Each chapter includes ideas, illustrations, stories and reflective questions, and closes with a piece on “stepping back”.

The book closes with a chapter in which using the six roles and the four positions comes alive through applications illustrated in a variety of settings including small and family businesses, as well as a community organisation.

The book does what it invites us to do – greet the world with an “open door, warm welcome, and open heart”. And the authors in true host style bid farewell to their readers with an offer to enjoy more via free bonus materials and resources accessible at the website www.hostleadership.com

If you are wondering whether this book has anything to do with the SF approach that Mark McKergow is well known for, then the simple answer is Yes AndRead Host to discover how “a new word (host) is like a fresh seed sown on the ground of the discussion” (around leadership) – adapted from Wittgenstein.

Svea van der Hoorn is an SF Brief trainer and practitioner and Adult Learning Specialist from Cape Town, South Africa.
svea@solutionfocusedfutures.com