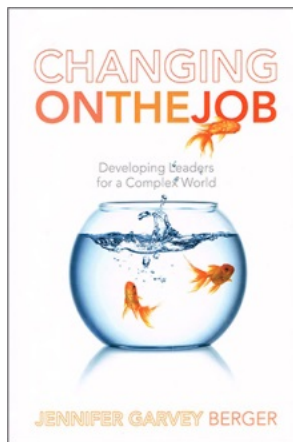


## Book Review



***Changing on the job: Developing leaders for a complex world.*** Author: Jennifer Garvey Berger, 2012, Stanford Business Books, Stanford, CA.

Reviewed by Glenn Martin.

Helping leaders grow to meet the challenges of today's business environment is a project that has been taken up by many writers. Our world is complex and it presents many risks and threats, and it gives rise to behaviour that is aggressive or defensive, self-interested, and frequently destructive. The question is whether it is possible for people to develop beyond such behaviour. Berger's book offers a practical answer by providing a developmental framework for learning and an approach to guiding people towards more empowering forms of thinking.

Berger's driving force is that many leaders today are unable to handle complexity, ambiguity and change because they operate out of self-limiting perspectives (world views) that are simplistic, rigid and self-centred. She maintains that these ways of thinking are generally not visible, yet they have more impact on personal and organisational dynamics than skills and knowledge. However, when greater performance is desired, or conflict occurs, it is generally skills and knowledge that are the focus of conversation.

It is illuminating to have the distinction made between knowledge, skills and techniques on the one hand, and on the other, underlying patterns of thinking. The business literature is replete with 'solutions' in the form of quick tips and techniques, but Berger's observation is that these may not address the real difficulties; it is actually people's underlying patterns of thinking that lead to the difficulties.

The book is based on the idea of stages of adult development. Berger draws on the stages approach developed by Kegan (1982) and other writers (Wilber, 2001; Beck & Cowan, 1996). She depicts four stages of thinking: self-sovereign, socialised, self-authored and self-transforming, although she acknowledges that for different purposes, further stages can be interpolated. The book fleshes out descriptions of how people at the different stages think, and addresses the question that now becomes the question of greatest interest: how do people develop from one stage of thinking to the next?

Berger writes that the later stages of adult development are characterised by an ability to recognise multiple conceptions of the world and to consider and integrate different perspectives without being threatened and without being judgemental. The thinking patterns that Berger explores should be familiar to readers from their experience in the workplace. She asks us to recognise each of the forms of thinking and to recognise their strengths and their limitations.

The self-sovereign mindset is only able to consider the impact of situations on oneself; the socialised mindset takes an institution as the reference point (e.g. the employer) and is unable to deal with conflicts that bring the institution itself into question. Beyond this, the self-authored and self-transforming mindsets allow the person to see multiple perspectives without losing their own, and to bring principles to bear on situations. The self-transforming mindset, in addition, continues to integrate and transform broader perspectives, and appreciates the interconnectedness of things.

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The idea that people operate at different conceptual levels is helpful in developing leaders because it gets us beyond the story level and allows us to examine how people make meaning out of their experience of the world. At the story level, further examination may just yield more information and detail, without necessarily helping us to find out the patterns of thinking that motivate people. We may be left with superficial, default explanations, such as the trite conclusion that conflict is the result of differences in style or personality.

As an example, Berger looks at attitudes towards authority as exhibited by the four forms of mind. At the self-sovereign level, authority is found in rules and regulations. At the socialised level, people have internalised principles, values and roles, and this is fine until there is a conflict with another person's or organisation's values. The self-authored person has determined their own values and can therefore understand the nature of conflicts between people and institutions. The self-transforming form of mind deals with authority more fluidly, and is responsive to the needs of people and situations.

Berger does a fine job of depicting these differences in outlook and how they manifest in organisations, through a number of vignettes. She describes some scenarios (that may be all too familiar to the reader) of bitter, intractable and bewildering conflicts between people who at the outset seem intelligent and mutually possessed of goodwill.

The key question is: how do people develop from one stage of thinking to the next? How do they change their view of the world and their way of thinking? The great value of Berger's book is that this is the central focus. Having presented examples of situations where different modes of thinking lead to conflict, she walks the reader through processes that can help to bring the differences in thinking to the surface, and thereby make room for new approaches. And perhaps this is the most important work that needs to be done in workplaces.

Berger also recognises that the stages approach raises ethical issues. The approach carries the implication that some stages are 'better' than others, since they allow for a greater capacity to manage a variety of situations. There is important thinking around values that needs to be undertaken by anybody using the concept of stages, and Berger offers the reader her thinking on the matter. Her view is along the lines that developmental theory offers us a constructive framework for the judgements that we already make.

The book examines the developmental process at several levels – at the level of interpersonal interactions, such as in coaching and consulting, then at the level of group interventions, then at the level of professional development generally in organisations. The book is intended to be helpful to people who help others to develop, but, of course, it is likewise invaluable for reflection on self-development.

The shift from simplistic and rigid levels of thinking to more agile and adaptable patterns of thinking is an important project for our time. It is necessary, as Berger says, to enable leaders and workers to deal with the complexities that they face. It is also important because it leads us in the direction of a spirituality that empowers people to deal with each other more gently and decently, and to engender work and business with qualities that will serve the world and society better.

## REFERENCES

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**Availability:** Available as hardback, paperback and Kindle e-book.

**Reviewer:** Glenn Martin, writer on human resources, training and development, and ethics, and author of *Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace* and *To the Bush and Back to Business*.