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Book Review
*Leading Without Power:
Finding Hope in Serving Community*

by

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Book Review

Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community

Max DePree, an acknowledged thinker on organizational leadership, is chairman emeritus of Herman Miller, a world leader in the manufacture of office furniture. He has written two previous best-selling books about organizational leadership: *Leadership Is an Art* and *Leadership Jazz*, both focusing on for-profit organizations. In his newest book, *Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community*, he concentrates on nonprofit organizations (“communities”) and examines the nature of leadership within them. DePree’s basic premises are:

- ◆ True leaders serve their organizations and the people who work in them, not the other way around;
- ◆ Good, old-fashioned values and virtues are just as important in building a successful organization as making a profit and using resources efficiently;
- ◆ The best organizations focus on giving hope to those they serve, and
- ◆ True leaders are the nurturers of that hope.

“The main role of leaders, he says, is to help their organizations become ‘places of realized potential,’ where those involved with the organization share a common vision and work toward a common good.”

His views are refreshing. His emphasis on the fundamental importance to true leaders of such core values as hope, integrity, justice, and equity in the workplace is a welcome change from the view that leaders in today’s resource-poor, lean-and-mean organizations must be tough, uncompromising, and unflinchingly focused on bottom-line success.

The main role of leaders, he says, is to help their organizations become “places of realized potential,” where those involved with the organization share a common vision and work toward a common good. The tragedy of organizations that do not strive toward realizing potential, posits DePree, is that they become

“The driving force in our organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, ought not to be goal achievement or asset management or quantifiable growth, important as these are. Rather, our society badly needs organizations and people that move relentlessly toward realizing their potential. . . . A place of realized potential opens itself to change . . . offer[s] people the opportunity to learn and grow . . . [and] the gift of challenging work . . . sheds its obsolete baggage . . . encourages people to decide what needs to be measured and then helps them do the work . . . [and] heals people with trust and with caring and with forgetfulness.”

closed, stale, and rigid. While they may ultimately meet their bottom lines, they never become truly successful nor do they substantively contribute to making their local communities, society, or the world a better place.

DePree champions the idea that places of realized potential become much more than mere organizations; they stand out as “. . . models of energy and devotion to a compelling cause . . . illustrate new ways of working together . . . [and] set standards of effective function and enlightened contribution.” These organizations exhibit a “collective state of mind, a public and common understanding that the future can be created, not simply experienced or endured.” These kinds of organizations value creativity, optimism, and substance over bureaucracy and ultimately make the most significant contributions to society.

The author also discusses organizational measurement, which he feels is “directly connected to the health of the organization [and] to the way an organization can mature and grow . . . [and] reach [its] potential.” In his view, measuring production output and bottom-line profit is less important than measuring such factors as “how a vision is translated into a mission . . . how good [we are] at orienting volunteers to the work we need them to do . . . how effective [we are] at giving opportunities, challenge, recognition, and growth to people who serve in nonprofits . . . [and] what [an organization] expect[s] from people in the way of work.” He stresses that the two most important questions that organizations must answer in order to measure their success are: “How does our performance compare to our plan, and how does our performance compare to our potential?”

He believes that in order to be successful, every organization needs to embrace certain core qualities or values, which include equity, trust, order, civility, good manners, sensitivity, and forgiveness. Leaders, he says, are responsible for seeing that these qualities exist in the workplace, and he emphasizes that the ways in which leaders behave and communicate their own values will set the tone for the entire organization. “Long term consequences,” he says, “always accompany the messages we convey.” He lists additional key attributes that, in his estimation, make for a vital organization: truth, access, discipline, accountability, nourishment

for persons (through provision of transforming work, growth, and opportunities for reaching their potential), authenticity, justice, respect, hope, workable unity, tolerance, simplicity, beauty and taste, and fidelity to a mission.

The importance of vision in an organization and a definition of what it takes for an organization to be considered visionary are also addressed. We can teach ourselves to “see things the way they are [but] . . . only with vision can we see things the way they can be.” DePree offers a list of key questions organizations need to ask themselves about vision and concludes that, “Our society is full of nonprofit groups inspired by visions of the world as it might be. Their visions give us hope, but we cannot see the vision until it becomes real.”

At fewer than 200 pages, and with plenty of “whitespace” (DePree had his publisher leave enough room on each page so readers could take notes and write their thoughts and ideas in the book), this book is a quick read. It covers a multitude of topics in a gently meandering way that can, at times, be puzzling, but the author’s genial, friendly manner makes the reader instinctively want to like and trust him. The easy, anecdotal, but authoritative way in which he writes makes for a book that’s enlightening, entertaining, and refreshingly free of the jargon that litters so many books on organizational behavior.

Most of DePree’s ideas and suggestions could readily and appropriately be applied to symphony orchestra organizations. Staff members, musicians, music directors, volunteers, and board members could all benefit from reading his book and relating what he says to their own leadership and organizations.

Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community

Max DePree

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