

Leadership A to Z

An interview with James O'Toole about appropriately ambitious leaders.

Training & Development *spoke with James O'Toole about his new book, Leadership A to Z: A Guide for the Appropriately Ambitious, and other thoughts about what makes an effective leader.*

T&D: Well, I guess the first question is what do you mean by “appropriately ambitious”?

O'Toole: If you look at all of the great leaders in the world and ask what personality, trait, or characteristic they have in common, there are two kinds of ambition. There's inappropriate ambition—personal motivation. And then I think of Gandhi, who was a modest man with no desire for power or wealth but who had ambition for people in India to have pride and self-respect in being an independent nation, and he was willing to put himself on the line for that. That is what I'd call appropriately ambitious.

T&D: What prompted you to write the book?

O'Toole: People were constantly emailing me and calling me and asking, What should I read about leadership? So, I tried to summarize the key learnings about leadership from the very best minds over the past couple of decades, many of whom I've worked with. Each chapter is around a single idea and based upon some research or experience. An example is given, and a lesson is drawn or a conclusion is made on which a reader can act.

T&D: It's a very accessible looking book. How does it depart from leaders teaching others to lead, followership, and other leadership ideas?

O'Toole: What is different—there are three things. One is how it looks on leadership as who the leader is: Anybody at any level can help build leadership throughout the entire organization. Two, the behavior of followers is a measure of leadership. Followers achieve their aspirations. Those are some insights of Max DePree, but it goes a little bit further.

One issue for any leader is to get alignment of the behaviors of the followers with organizational goals. The problem with alignment is that by itself, it can be self-defeating. If everyone is lined up going in the wrong direction, for example, that's not going to be effective. Some organizations are well aligned, but they are bureaucracies and very inflexible.

So, what has been discovered in the past couple of years is that organizations have to be not only aligned, but also have to be adaptable. Those are two organizational capacities: Alignment and adaptability, which can actually be measured. Those are not things you can see by looking at morale or at the charisma of an organization's leader. You actually look at them and measure them by the behavior of the organization.

In doing some research with Booz-Allen & Hamilton, and the World Economic Forums, and the Davos Group regarding the strategic leadership quotient of eight great global corporations, what

we find is that when they're successful, all of their systems, processes, structures—everything they do from communication to rewards—simultaneously encourage alignment and adaptability. Moreover, this is something that is planned. This kind of leadership can be learned, it can be planned, and it can be structured.

In organizations such as those in our sample, the leaders have laid out what they have to do to get alignment and adaptability simultaneously, and they make sure there's coherence in everything they say and everything they do and in all of the actions they take to get alignment and adaptability. It's an important lesson at any level in thinking about the task of leadership.

It's also a very positive thing because it says that leadership does not have to depend on the leader. The leader doesn't have to do everything, doesn't have to be the smartest person in the organization, or do all the work. As a leader, you have to work on about a dozen dimensions that will create conditions under which the adaptability and the alignment will occur. That narrows the task of a leader and focuses on those things that will lead to effectiveness. It allows leaders to help the followers achieve their goals and their potential.

T&D: How would a person who's a CEO or manager use these skills?

O'Toole: I think you don't even have to have anyone reporting to you to be a leader. There are people who work in teams at a relatively low level in their organizations. To be effective, those teams

need adaptability and alignment. They need to focus, to learn, and to be motivated to do the right things, to achieve their goals. In fact, what a member of such teams would do would be no different on the dozen or so dimensions than if he or she were the CEO or Gandhi going about trying to bring about independence in India.

I work with groups of executives, executive teams, and the way I start with them is to watch a film about Gandhi and then have a discussion. Those executives will identify about a dozen things—20 at most—that Gandhi did to be an effective leader that if they did those same things, they'd be effective as well. Down the organization with middle managers, they come up with the same list.

What this is all about is getting people focused on the things they can learn, they can do, and they can emulate to be effective.

T&D: Given that leadership filters down through all levels, do organizations still need one leader at the top?

O'Toole: If the task is change, for example, you need a leader who's supportive, who creates the conditions that will help other people bring about the change. But the work of leadership, the change, does not have to be done by that one person at the top. That person certainly has to sanction it.

Two examples from the book come to mind: two transformations at Corning. The nature of the tasks was entirely different. But, in both cases, the CEO led the change in identifying the objectives, the vision, the principles, and the values of the organization—offering rewards consistent with those—and then removed the obstacles that would prevent people from doing what they needed to do. In neither case was the actual work done by the CEO.

There are people who have thought about this and built a theory around this. And the theory is very consistent. What I tried to do in the book is show that people have thought about it and that the theory is consistent with the practice. If you look at people like Ron Heifetz and Warren Bennis, the examples I've collected since 1969 support their theories. A lot of the theory that's out there is really quite usable. I tried to give some practical examples of what it really means, what does a leader really do that is consistent with the theories.

T&D: So, teams, empowered employees can do this?

O'Toole: This approach to leadership is the most empowering of all. What we're saying is that whoever you are, whatever your weaknesses, if you have one trait—that you really care about your organization and your people, no matter what personality type you have—you can learn how to do these things to help them be effective. That is a very empowering message.

The examples in the book are of people with all kinds of personality types and yet they were able to be very effective. In every example, the key change was made by the people doing the work. In no case do I cite a leader who's the know-it-all, see-it-all, who lays out for everybody what they have to do. That just doesn't work. The ultimate in empowerment is making other people in the organization into leaders.

What they do at ABB, for example, is instill a common philosophy and approach to leadership throughout the entire organization. [Such companies] know they succeed when they see everyone behaving as leaders. When that happens, you get the alignment, you get the adaptability, you get the effectiveness in the organization.

That takes a tremendous amount of discipline on the part of leaders. They have to overcome the instinct to order people, tell them the answers, and take over when they aren't doing their jobs. They have to make people take responsibility to lead and hold them accountable. That runs counter to the instincts of most of us because being more like a teacher than a doer doesn't fit with our models of leadership—particularly if you're a man in this society, with our sports coaches, war heroes, and the like. This is much harder, I think, for men to overcome.

T&D: Do you think women lead differently?

O'Toole: Women face different problems and challenges because social expectations tend to be different for them. I think that's changing, and I'm happy it's changing. But I think men and women start off from different places in terms of socialization and social expectations. Women have different obstacles than men do, but at least women don't have the John Wayne role model to overcome. The most damaging is the typical male role model,

the commander that we subtly and constantly reinforce in our society.

You go through a training program with very bright people and you work with them, and, at the end, the rate of recidivism among men is very high. They will slip back into the old habits, and the [new learning] has to be constantly reinforced.

You can't go in one time and create these leaders and the leadership capacity is then built into the organization. In fact, in any organization there's tremendous regression toward past behavior. So, the right philosophy—this notion of cascading leadership—has to be constantly reinforced. If you look at all of the leaders mentioned in the book, they spend about 70 to 80 percent of their time communicating, not only the values and objectives of their organization, but also the appropriate leadership model.

T&D: I think women may have latched onto the traditional male leadership model at first.

O'Toole: Read the chapter on Tina Brown. The *New Yorker* was traditionally hierarchical: Senior editors would drop little notes to their people, and it never occurred to them that wasn't the best way to deal with bright, intellectual people and bring out their capabilities. Tina got out of her office and got down in the trenches with the people. She stretched them, let them grow, and created a whole new cadre of leaders so that when she left, the organization was not dependent on Tina Brown. There were many people who could take over, who were capable of leading. I don't think you'll find a better example—in three pages—of how you go about leading people in stretching, nurturing, and holding them accountable. Never telling them what do, but never allowing them to get by with doing something easy in which they aren't learning, raising the bar, or working toward fulfilling themselves. She's a controversial person, but...

T&D: Yes, not everyone would agree with what she did editorially. Do you think we're disillusioned in general with our leaders in every arena—business and politics?

O'Toole: I think we're disillusioned with the whole subject of leadership. You get people like "Chainsaw" Al Dunlap and President Clinton, and there's tremendous disillusionment. There's cynicism about

leadership in the entire country today and when you consider the kinds of leaders we've had in both the private and public sectors, it's not surprising that's the case.

That's why I think we have to start thinking about leadership as an organizational capacity and not just an individual one. The organization that depends on one individual for its success is a risky proposition. Yet, we continue to associate successful organizations with a single individual—people talk about Jack Welch. We have to start thinking of companies not in terms of who the leader is, but in terms of overall organizational capacity. When we do, we'll have a different model of leadership, a much healthier one, and we will free ourselves from the cynicism and skepticism that naturally arise when you have somebody who clearly either abuses or disappoints by not having the appropriate ambition.

I love all of the leaders and others I use as examples in the book and when you call them on it, they say, "Of course, I'm not talking about there being one leader in the organization." But the usual way people talk about leadership is to point to individuals. I slip into it myself. I think we have to break ourselves of that very bad habit. When we do, I think we'll have healthier, greater, true leadership, and a lot less disappointment and dependence upon these men and women on white horses.

The idea of charismatic personalities is in our culture. George Washington is seen as a father figure, but in terms of governing, he did very little. He had Adams, Jefferson, and Hamilton. Those were the people making the decisions, the brain trust. There were people behind them, too.

T&D: Is there anything else we need to know about leadership?

O'Toole: I'm hoping the study by Booz-Allen and the World Economic Forum will be a step in changing the way people think about leadership. One of the most important things in switching to an organizational focus is that the characteristics, the actions, and all of the other things associated with leadership become measurable. The discipline of leadership is often undisciplined. There are a lot of ideas and theories, it's impressionistic and anecdotal, but as long as it's about individuals, it's going to remain that way because individuals, by definition, are all different.

It's the successes, the failures, the link-

ages between what leaders do and the outcomes that are measurable. Then, leadership will become more of a science, and it will be possible to go into an organization and do a diagnostic and see where the organization is weak in terms of its overall organizational capacity and where it's strong. Then, you'll be able to say, "Here are some things you need to do so the organization can be led more effectively."

We're very close to a breakthrough in thinking. A lot of the work that's gone before by people like Heifetz and James MacGregor Burns is prelude to this. We're now getting ready to make the next step, and I'm excited by it. On the one hand, in the field of leadership the bloom is off the rose. But now, we're ready to move on to the next stage to be more productive.

No matter how you come out on a 360, it's hard to change who you are and how people perceive you. But the book has some practical things you can do, and ask yourself how you can apply the lessons from each chapter of the book. Each can be discussed and translated to whatever task you're doing, at whatever level you are. □

James O'Toole was interviewed by Haidee Allerton, managing editor of Training & Development. O'Toole's book, Leadership A to Z: A Guide for the Appropriately Ambitious, is published by Jossey-Bass (1999).