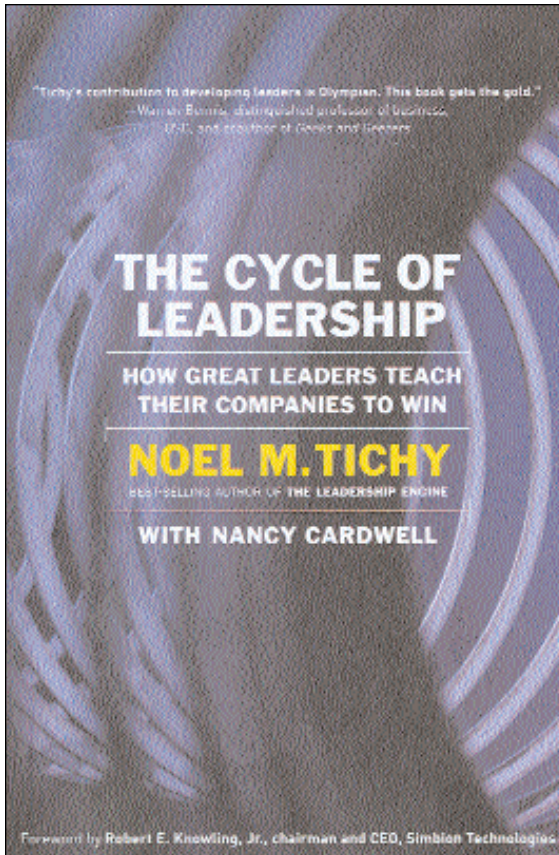


BOOKS



The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win

By Noel Tichy With Nancy Cardwell
Reviewed by W. Warner Burke

Noel Tichy's latest book, *The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win*, is perhaps his best so far. For a quick understanding of what this book is about, I offer two anecdotes—one personal and the other about a famous musician.

Almost four decades ago when I had just graduated from the University of Texas, Austin, with a shiny new PhD, one of my professors, a statistician, asked me to stay on for the summer and teach an undergraduate introductory statistics course. I said, "You have to be kidding! You know I struggled with statistics." He said, "You now have a PhD,

right?" "Yes." "Well, you can teach anything," he said. "And it pays \$1000." I replied, "I'll do it!"

Over the next nine weeks, I stayed up late every night preparing the following day's lecture, having such insights as "So that's what a z score being based on a normal distribution means." I was finally learning statistics. The moral of the story: The best way to learn something is to have to teach it.

Second anecdote: Itzhak Perlman, a master of the violin, can make his Stradivarius sing. It's not just his immense skills but the passion and color he brings to the coordination of the

ON THE NIGHT STAND

By Bill Shackelford



I've been a bedtime reader since age five, and late-night reading remains one of life's forbidden pleasures—even more so now that sleep specialists say it's bad for us.

Over the past several years, I've moonlighted as an opera critic in Chicago. The world of opera might sound far removed from that of training and project management but not really, considering that opera production is one of the most complex multimedia projects imaginable. Dealing with divas, soaring production costs, musicians' unions, and finicky audiences offers plenty of lessons. Right now, I'm reading Brigitte Hamann's epic page-turner biography of Winifred Wagner, composer Richard's controversial daughter-in-law, who ran the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth throughout the Nazi period.

Other books on my nightstand: Giovinnella Gonthier's *Rude Awakenings: Overcoming the Civility Crisis in the Workplace* has much to say about the importance of respect and kindness in corporate life, and says it with wit and charm. *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*, by Michael Gelb, is a terrific right-brain stimulant and always leads me back to my computer to admire the ingenious interfaces in Corbis's (sadly out-of-print) *Leonardo da Vinci* CD-ROM. Finally, Edward R. Tufte's luxurious *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* is a book no training professional should be without.

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strings and bow. In recent years, Perlman learned to teach and conduct music. He and his wife, Toby, hold summer camps for young talents age 11 to 18. Early on, Perlman conducted with a pencil because he didn't feel he was good enough to use a baton. Now he not only uses a baton but is a guest conductor for major orchestras all over the world. How did he learn to be an accomplished conductor? He'd express it as learning from the interaction he has had with his students—in particular, his Goose Bump Class, in which he urges students to talk about music that “thrills and chills them.” They discuss color and nuance, and their feelings about the music they play. “It helps me teach them,” said Perlman in the *New York Times* (“What Itzhak Perlman Learned at Summer Camp,” August 8, 2002).

That form of interaction between teacher (leader) and student (follower) is what Tichy refers to as the “virtuous teaching cycle.” It means that a leader attempts to teach something of importance regarding his or her work unit's or organization's performance to followers. The followers react and respond to that teaching. The leader listens carefully, learns from what the followers have to say, then modifies what's being taught accordingly.

That interactive cycle of teaching, learning, and then teaching again according to what was learned is *the* theme

of Tichy's new book. Tichy's choice of the term *virtuous* is unique and could come across as a bit pretentious. But he's adamant about using the term as a way of contrasting that process with a “vicious cycle”—which he describes as a leader being top-down, noninteractive with little, if any, learning involved and an attempt to impose one's point of view on others.

So, Tichy equates effective leadership with a special form of teaching with the core being exchange of learning. Equating leader with teacher puts Tichy in good company. James McGregor Burns wrote in his 1979 book on leadership that a transformational leader is, at least in part, a teacher. Tichy places emphasis on the teaching organization rather than on the more au courant *learning organization*. An organization's business processes, organizational structures, and day-to-day operating mechanisms are built to promote teaching. An effective leader, even in such routine and even boring tasks such as budget meeting, treats whatever the task is as an opportunity to teach—such as how the budgeting process is an integral part of the overall system and how each part of the system affects the others. The learning occurs in how the leader teaches interactively.

Each leader in an organization—from top to bottom—must create “his or her own teachable point of view.” The elements of a teachable point of

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view are having ideas, articulating a clear set of values, providing emotional energy, and having edge—meaning making tough yes-or-no decisions. It also means taking full ownership for teaching other leaders; thus, the examples in Tichy's book are meant to stimulate learning, not to be copied.

And provide examples Tichy does! His prime ones come from General Electric, which isn't surprising for anyone who knows Tichy's background and experience. But other examples are plentiful: The Home Depot, Focus: HOPE, Yum! Brands, Trilogy, the U.S. military's Special Operations Forces, Limited Brands, and Dell, to name some of the main ones.

Tichy cites Dell's norm of encouraging idea sharing informally. Tichy's book quotes Michael Dell: "Information in its raw form doesn't present itself in neat and tidy packages. That's why you must encourage the free flow of information at all levels." Leaders via an informal exchange process seize opportunities to make points, teach new ideas, and teach new ways of problem solving.

The strength of this book is twofold: One, Tichy thoroughly explains what his cycle of leadership notion is all about and grounds his perspective in sound experience, giving one example after another. Two, Tichy shares his experience by telling us how to build a teaching organization. The Handbook at the end, co-authored with Chris DeRose, lays out the steps.

I have only one bone of contention: In the chapter on the "paradox of power," Tichy makes what I feel is an unwarranted assertion that a strong anti-leadership bias has been engendered by some schools of thought—such as that change must be from the bottom up and the school of thought espoused in the Collins and Porras book, *Built to Last*, that strong cultures don't

require powerful leadership. Tichy further claims that this bias emerged from the application of theory and research based on the work of Kurt Lewin and especially sensitivity training. Though Lewin championed participative leadership, he also showed that *laissez-faire*, an abdicating form of leadership, was not effective. Lewin wasn't anti-leadership. The sensitivity training movement, at its peak in the 1960s, long since lost its influence. It's inappropriate to attribute any conspiracy against leadership today to that piece of history. Anti-leadership has more to do with the residue of Watergate, Clinton years, and current abuse of power at the top in some significant American corporations. Anti-leadership is grounded in followers' lack of trust, not some philosophical premise.

My disagreement is minor when considering the book's entirety. Let me conclude with a quote from Tichy that I wholeheartedly support: "The essence of leading is not commanding, but teaching. It is opening people's eyes and minds. It is teaching them new ways to see the world and pointing them to new goals. It is giving them the motivation and discipline to achieve those goals. And it is teaching them to share their own knowledge and teach others."

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