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

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Host: Six new ~~rules~~ roles of engagement for teams, organizations, communities and movements

Mark McKergow and Helen Bailey
2014. London: Solutions Books.
Paperback

Review by Nick Burnett

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There may well be some discussion and debate as to whether this book sits within the Solution-Focused paradigm and I hope this review positions the book as a pragmatic and practical Solution-Focused leadership tool to help leaders understand, unpack and improve their leadership in a wide range of situations and environments.

McKergow and Bailey define a Host Leader as ‘... someone who engages fellow participants in a purposeful endeavour’. To further position this book within the solution focused approach to leadership they articulate hosting as an activity as opposed to a defining characteristic of a person. This ‘interactional view’ is a key underpinning of the Solution-Focused paradigm, and offers an alternative view to the psychological ‘person as a bag of traits’ paradigm (Jackson and McKergow, 2007).

They also build the case of the importance of metaphors as being very important as they offer a rich and broad set of ideas about leadership in a way which allows interpretation into many different real-life situations. The book builds the case against two current dominant leadership paradigms of hero or servant. Arguing that both of these have significant limitations for the current ‘wicked problems’ (Grint, 2005) organisations and leaders face. They build the case for the key question being for a host leader at every moment is: As a leader, are you going to step forward (hero), or step back (servant)? Therefore, the metaphor both includes former paradigms as well as creating a new more agile and responsive view.

A key point is that leadership in the twenty-first century is about rela-

tionships rather than transactions. A key difference when it comes to helping people make this transition is that it's not about ME anymore; it's much more about US — getting results through engaging others, building cooperation, enhancing relationships and pulling together so that the energies and experience of all are fully engaged. At a high level, McKergow and Bailey argue that hosting could be seen as being about setting context, giving protection and enabling community through an “agile” philosophy.

Host Leadership is positioned as being about roles, not rules — roles that we take on for a while, rather than rules we always follow. Anyone can think like a host — even when the situation looks very unpromising.

There are six roles and four positions for a Host Leader.

Six roles

1. Initiator
 - Noticing what's needed — a call to action
 - Getting things started
 - Responding to what happens
2. Inviter — about using the soft power of invitation and influence.
3. Space creator
 - The role of space — as a factor in what happens
 - Different types of space — physical, interactional, head space
 - Making the space fit the place — taking care with details
 - Holding the space — stepping back once people have arrived, being aware of how things are going, making adjustments and being prepared to step forward when needed.
4. Gatekeeper — more often concerned with drawing boundaries that will help create and sustain progress. These may be in terms of people involved, in terms of rules and routines, and in terms of psychological safety. We will examine how you can host well using these ideas:
 - Boundaries and thresholds — insiders and outsiders
 - Container size — choosing the boundaries
 - Boundary-spanning leadership
 - Closing the gate
5. Connectors — They build connections between people, link people

and ideas AND know when to leave them to get on with it. We will look at three levels of connector

- Level 1: Connecting with others (understanding people)
- Level 2: Connecting others (connecting people and ideas)
- Level 3: Everything is connected (wise connectedness).

6. Co-participator

Four key positions for a Host Leader

1. In the spotlight — Being the focus of attention, out front, making things happen
2. With the guests — Still out front, but being “one of the group” – not the centre of attention
3. In the gallery — Standing back, taking an overview of what’s happening
4. In the kitchen — In a more private and intimate space, preparing and reflecting

Implications

The authors also identify the implications for a leader as host as being:

- Relational — hosting can only happen with others (‘guests’)
- Invitational — hosts tend to use ‘soft power’ and a welcoming hand, rather than coercion
- Creating meaning — providing a context for new interactions and sense-making to occur
- Thinking in phases — looking around the task and including preparation and reflection as integral activities
- Taking care — the host has a traditional primary role in safeguarding their guests
- Taking responsibility — and therefore being accountable for what happens, whether planned or not.

As stated earlier the key question for a host leader is do I step forwards or backwards?

They identify that as a host leader you are dancing between stepping forwards (and acting in an heroic mode) — defining expectations; and stepping backwards (serving and providing, leaving space open for others) — creating space for interaction. To do this the host leader needs three skills:

- Awareness: Of the spectrum of possibilities and how they connect with the organisation and its work
- Flexibility: To actually act and perform effectively in different places along the hero-servant spectrum
- Timing: The contextual intelligence to know when to act, when to move, when to stand back and when to change tack.

Having been a leader, I find the Host metaphor with the six roles and four positions a much more pragmatic and useful metaphor to unpack the complexities of leadership as well as provide a range of possible ways forward for the leader. Whilst there may be some who would argue that Host Leader is a 'model' and therefore not within the Solution-Focused paradigm, its emphasis on the interactional view of leadership positions it within the Solution-Focused paradigm in my view as it allows for the 'every case is different' complex view of leadership as opposed to positioning itself as the 'right answer'.

McKergow and Bailey also identify that as a Host Leader, we will become more skilled at holding two different elements in mind: a future intention, hope or goal; and great flexibility over exactly what steps may be required to make progress. They refer to this as dynamic steering.

Whilst they refer to this in relation to the leadership perspective, from my own practice as an individual, group and team coach, I believe there is a highly useful and practical Solution-Focused coaching tool contained within the book, namely that of 'The User's Guide to the Future'.

Key points to the 'User's Guide to the Future' is that it shows that not every element of the future is seeable or usable in the same way. The horizon, although it may be in the far distance, is vital in terms of setting a direction for progress, as are the first tiny next steps. Next, in terms of importance is what needs to be in place for the horizon, future perfect, to be achieved, and also the first signs that the tiny small steps are heading us in the right direction. The middle distance — "ant country" — is potentially a burden. It's too far away to know effectively and can be a distraction. This four-step coaching and planning tool has proved highly useful with individuals, groups and teams

In summary, this book may well not be for everyone in the Solution-Focused community but I would highly recommend it for those in leadership positions or working with people in leadership positions to enable reflec-

tions at a greater depth due to it bringing the interactional nature of leadership more clearly into focus.

References

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The reviewer

Nick Burnett is committed to helping people and organisations be the best they can be. He is an experienced and accomplished Educational Coach, Consultant, and Presenter. He is the Managing Consultant for Queensland with Growth Coaching International. He has run training for well over 4000 people in the last 10 years, presented at a number of conferences, and has written for a wide range of publications, including authoring books on Leadership and Special Education Provision and Reducing Risk and Restraint in Asia Pacific and Working Restoratively in Special Education, with plans to co-author a book on Solution-Focused Special Education. Prior to this he was recognised as an excellent leader of an all-age, large Special School Provision in the UK.

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