

Unleashing the Power of Rubber Bands: lessons in non-linear leadership

Nancy Ortberg (Tyndale, 2008)

This book was published a few months ago, and I was immediately intrigued by the title – and the sub-title. Lots of people, especially women, express frustration at the prevailing 'linear' approach to leadership, but what's the alternative, and does it work? And what have rubber bands got to do with it?

The rubber band question is easily answered. One day, one of Ortberg's colleagues was talking about leadership development. He stretched a rubber band very tight – and stretched almost to breaking point, it was almost ruined. But when he held the band so it was slack, not stretched at all, it was not capable of doing anything. So the power of rubber bands is using them so they are stretched by the right amount. Developing leaders is about stretching people by the right amount – so they grow.

And 'non-linear'? Ortberg explains how she pinned up one word, 'Flourish', on her cork board. Rather than having a detailed plan of what to do, what she most needed was a word would inspire her and motivate her to lead well. So this book is not about how to lead in a sequential, ordered way, but explores the idea that much of what happens in leadership is non-linear. 'There is no clear-cut, step-by-step convergence of conditions that guarantees results; it's the convergence of conditions that creates a climate where people and organisations prosper.' The style and contents of the book express this well. The flip side is that if (like me) you like your books to have subheadings, diagrams and a sense of where you're going – you won't find them here.

The contents list includes chapter headings like: 'the problem with T-shirts', 'Seabiscuit' 'What you may not know about mongooses'... Not like most of the leadership books I've ever read. But the book covers all the key themes of leadership and leadership development: vision and direction, dealing with change, teamwork, the importance of conflict (the right sort of conflict), choosing the right people for the job, developing other leaders, and how to lead oneself.

Nancy Ortberg is a founding partner of Teamworx2, a business and leadership consulting firm, which works to address issues of organisational effectiveness and teamwork, and she is also a consulting partner for Patrick Lencioni, author of *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. She is married to John Ortberg, and is a former teaching pastor at Willow Creek. Her book effectively combines her Christian faith with insights from the corporate world, and she draws her examples from both ministry and marketplace contexts.

One of the reasons I liked this book was that it was an example of something that is still all too rare: a book about leadership that happens to be written by a woman. And I think it's a book that many women (as well as men) will find valuable and thought-provoking. It's lively, honest, and full of anecdotes and stories, and Ortberg is refreshingly vulnerable when it comes to the mistakes she has made as a leader. 'If you lead people, ignore this book at your own risk – or theirs.'

The final chapter of the book is entitled, 'Understatement of the Year'. The understatement is, that leadership is hard. She makes the obvious but important and sometimes overlooked point that there is a big difference between being good at something and that something being easy. You can be an excellent leader, and find that leadership is still hard. So the book finishes with an encouragement to recognise that leadership is hard, but to stick at it because 'leadership matters'.