

Gestalt Review 2017

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**Janet Ruckert, EdD (6 June 1926 – 24 February 2017)
*Liv Estrup, MA***

**Karen Humphrey, MA (25 September 1941 – 11 March 2017)
*Lee Zevy, LCSW***

Expanding Your Leadership: A Journey Towards Building Character

by Dagrun Dvergsdal. Oslo: Abstrat forlag AS, 2014

I love this book describing the design and implementation of a leadership development program, but I may not be entirely impartial. First, I know, like, and respect the author, Dagrun Dvergsdal, having encountered her during my years at the Gestalt International Study Center (GISC), both as participant in programs and as CEO of the organization. Second, I subscribe to and use the Gestalt approach to leadership development that underpins the book and the program described by the author. Even without those connections, however, I believe I would have valued this text because it is unusual in describing a whole process of design and implementation, and it is well structured and well written. It can be a useful resource for a wide audience.

The author includes the business rationale behind program development and program outcomes, examples of program modules, succinct participant

anecdotes, and descriptions of specific important elements, such as learning groups and the teaching of good feedback process. Dvergsdal also presents leadership theory and research as it supports program design decisions. The inclusion of many participant anecdotes, sometimes in their own language, makes the book and the program come alive. Because of its multiple layers, the volume would be useful for consultants who are in the business of designing leadership programs, leaders who are considering implementing a development program, coaches working with leaders, and leaders working on their own development.

The development program described is captured in the book's title, *Expanding Your Leadership*. The goal of the program was to build character, unlike many leadership programs that are designed to motivate or to build technical skills. I know from my own experience that many organizations would see this goal as too soft, as entirely unnecessary. Dvergsdal cogently discusses this value judgment with respect to organizations and potential participants, and explains why the organization in question chose to set its leadership development goals so high. She spells out the personal, business, and organizational benefits both in theory and in the actual outcomes derived from this specific program. My only wish is that the chapter on outcomes had been up front rather than at the end, so as to capture those leaders who would put the book down before seeing the possibilities.

It is worth listing the chapter titles, as they clearly present the book's structure:

- (1) Disappointments in leader development
- (2) Program expectations
- (3) The exceptional role of being the program owner
- (4) Building a learning team
- (5) The architecture of the program
- (6) Program content
- (7) Effective learning groups
- (8) Fundamental learning—Expanding your character
- (9) Guiding discovery versus teaching
- (10) Leader development as an assertive rather than a defensive project
- (11) Being on a journey towards building character
- (12) Nice experiences—But any real results?

To explain some of the specific language in the chapter titles: the "program owner" is the leader commissioning and championing the leadership development within the organization. In the case described, the program owner was exceptionally enlightened in personal and professional awareness and played an important role in building buy-in for the participants throughout the program. I wish I could always have the benefit of such a

leader as the program owner, but I have only been so fortunate once. My assumption is that, without such a champion, the investment in a program like this one would be unlikely.

The learning team consisted of the group of consultants, coaches, and content presenters. Chapter 4, "Building a Learning Team," describes why people were chosen, including decisions on internal versus external contributors, as well as how they worked together both in design and in implementation. Dvergsdal emphasizes both the formal and informal competencies sought in creating the learning team. Just as the program was going to challenge the participants to relate their formal learning to individual experiences and challenges, the learning team needed to be able to do and model the same: "We see it as a privilege to have a dynamic, anchored, wondering orientation, and we see it as a prerequisite for members of a learning team. Furthermore, it encourages humility: to be in a process ourselves all the way makes us aware of being human beings 'in transit'" (p. 86).

The architecture of the program and the content are described at a high level, along with a matrix of desired leadership competencies and personal development goals. Four program modules were delivered, with time in between during which participants were individually coached. The modules were titled: "Who we are; leader identity," "Create our future" (with a focus on innovation and the future of the company), "Me making a difference while managing business and risks," and "Execute through effective collaboration." These modules were based on the "Energy Wave" or, in my Gestalt language, the "Cycle of Experience." The design of Module One was described in specific detail as an example of the design of all modules.

Important to note as a foundational value of the program described (and particularly resonant to me as a value of programs I design) is that of enhancement versus repair. The author describes elegantly what is too often the perspective of leadership development, that of finding weaknesses and faults and offering up better ways to behave: what I call the "diagnose and treat" model, and she calls the "repair" model. These models are based on assessments and measurements, which, while reassuring in their presumption of accuracy, are lacking in their usefulness as a vehicle for meaningful and lasting change.

Real and lasting change—particularly for leaders who are already highly competent and advanced in their careers—comes from getting people interested in possibilities, and then supporting them to learn how to utilize more of their potential. The "piano key analogy" can be applied here: if you learn to play as a child and can play many songs, there are still keys rarely or never touched, and an infinite number of melodies never played. Dvergsdal states:

To use one's capacity, to make use of one's resources, seems to bring happiness, meaning, and an experience of being a whole human being. To hold back, to live one's life mainly without achieving one's potential, may be easy for a time but can turn out to become a heavy burden in the end. Practically speaking, if leaders' development can support people to use more of their potential, it will be deeply motivating for participants. It becomes a win-win situation for themselves and for the company owners. (p. 172)

Since leaders highly experienced at success often feel awkward and uncomfortable, it is difficult to help them move into a mindset of exploring new competencies. That happens sometimes by chance, on account of crisis, but the program Dvergsdal describes achieved those results by design, primarily because of the learning intent behind every element of its structure and content. Both the program and the book are an admirable success.

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