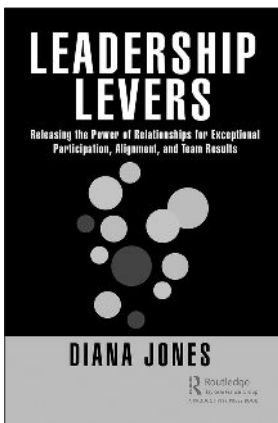


# Book reviews



*Leadership Levers: Releasing the Power of Relationships for Exceptional Participation, Alignment, and Team Results*

By Diana Jones

Routledge, London and New York  
2021

Reviewed by Helen Phelan

Having been in leadership development programs in organisations for many years, I was warmed up to the focus of the book and recognised the aspects the book addresses as highly relevant for these times; aspects that may not be new, but have needed addressing in a fresh way to enable new leadership outcomes of inclusive and collegial workplaces.

When scanning the Contents page – I am thinking yes! — these topics are the ones that come up time and again in professional development, supervision and reflecting on my work in organisational development, they are the hard, crunchy aspects of true leadership that are so often not recognised or taken up by seasoned or new leaders. Hard because to take up these principles, the leader has to challenge the established, ‘endorsed’ forms of leadership from the set expectations of higher leaders, political imperatives or influential peers. Crunchy because these leaders will continually get tested as they develop in this area.

Diana clearly states that unlike traditional views, leadership is not mastery of content, knowledge or set agendas; real leadership requires knowing themselves, being prepared to open up to the people on the team, developing the essential capacity to read people and learning how to inspire and invite their participation. This may be quite a work, as many leaders take on the positional authority to get people to meet the tasks, and often operate as if their knowledge is more important than the value the team members bring.

In my experience as a sociometrist in a fairly closed and traditionally-managed organisation, there was little recognition of ‘tele’ connections – those natural, vital and mostly invisible connections between people that make up the informal networks and systems where much of the informal messaging occurs, and often are the pathways for forming the workplace

culture. Diana illustrates the difficulties exposed when attempts to lead or encourage cooperation do not consider these natural connections and she crafts a process for leaders to explore these aspects and take them into account in establishing teams and the expectations of cooperation. Diana's strategies encourage leaders to look for the gold in the informal connections between people, including the related criteria of their connections – on what basis are they chosen and how can this assist in establishing more collegial working groups?

I enjoyed the expression of the areas of “seismic shifts” required. As an experienced trainer in organisations and a developing trainer in psychodrama, one of the areas I have been working with is the idea of “unlearning”. What are the areas that trainees need to suspend a little to be open to taking in the concepts and new ways of viewing their world and relating to others? I recognise that for many leaders, these are huge shifts, especially for those who have a set identity as a competent group worker based on a rather concrete set of criteria like agenda manager. For some leaders, these shifts are ‘seismic’, and each person's capacity to hold themselves through to the other side is very challenging.

Another aspect of interest to me was the section on developing strategies for responding progressively to leaders' experience of rejection; usually such an unmentionable topic in the corporate environment. This is a valuable piece of work, as I experienced many managers and leaders who would be very sensitive to others' ideas or opinions and would react strongly as if they were personally being rejected. I could feel myself recalling situations in my own work-life as Diana presented some examples, and then relief when she provided very clear choice points for leaders to respond rather than react. Curiosity, discovery, appreciation – three enlivening responses Diana gives that bring new energy to the leader and in my experience, to the group/team.

Other topics of interest include:

- challenging old paradigms
- considering who gets included, who excluded and what impacts these decisions have on getting the teams to work together
- checking if the best use of the available talents is achieved
- the required level of trust and focus on purpose
- enlivening meetings and planning sessions
- stepping past old habits and practices

Diana's book offers fresh ways that are based on her experiences working with Senior Executives and CEOs and her knowledge in applying sociometric principles. Her focus on these senior levels and team leaders is where changes of this dimension need to occur. Too often individuals and teams are given a change program, already planned without their

contribution. Having the focus on leaders tackling their own changes first, and then engaging and valuing team members, there is the possibility of real cooperative and inclusive workplaces.

It was an easy read for a book that covers such a complex range, and her expressions produced imagery that gave a clear picture of the 'before' and 'after' that increased my warmup to the strategies and approaches recommended. As a sociometrist, it is a joy to see so many aspects of sociometry translated into everyday leadership language and in ways to engage and embrace. This is especially appreciated for anyone in a fallow paddock with their writing, and I am sure this well-crafted contribution to the field of sociometry, group and team leadership, will continue to warm me and others up to expressing our own pictures and ideas.

Given the distortions in power leadership we are currently experiencing in the world, this approach using the power of beneficial and mutual relationships in leadership is both timely and critically relevant for us, each in our own areas of influence.



**Helen Phelan** is a Sociometrist and TEPit in Perth, WA. She now identifies with the title of Creative Retiree and had many years of experience in organisational, personal, and professional development in many contexts. A focus of her work was applying sociometry and psychodrama in the social justice and human rights area, particularly addressing systemic discrimination issues. She holds a MA in Human Rights and Grad Cert in Counselling.