

A Leadership Resource – A Review

By Bob Cuthill, Interim Transitional Executive Presbyter, Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area

Building a Bridge as You Walk On It

By Robert E. Quinn

Within the first few days after starting my adventure as Interim Transitional Executive Presbyter, I had heard about this book – “Building a Bridge as You Walk On It.” The title was confusing to me when first mentioned. It still jars me each time I hear it. My mind flashes immediately to the I-35 bridge that collapsed last summer in Minneapolis. The death and destruction of that collapse is fresh on my mind. I don’t want to build a bridge to the future that collapses right in front of me.

Thus I was predisposed to dislike this book by Robert E. Quinn. How could anyone build a bridge at the same time they walked on it? Now having plowed through the book I have to recant and say the author does have many insightful ideas for change.

The author has spent many years as a professor of organizational behavior and human resources at the Management School of Business Administration at the University of Michigan. He helps business and government leaders understand and manage organizational life through his teaching, consulting and publishing. Other books he has written on change are “Deep Change” and “Change the World.”

Anita Cummings, who first introduced the book to me, says the book’s most important message is, “One person can make a significant change happen in any organization.”

This book on building a bridge is clearly a “How To” book. Quinn makes it explicitly clear that the only way to have long term successful change in an organization is to first have a significant personal understanding of ourselves. We must move from a “Normal State of Leadership” into what he calls a “Fundamental State of Leadership.” At the end of each chapter he lays out exercises to help the reader become a “Fundamental State Leader.” I had to get beyond this workshop approach to appreciate the message of the book.

For Quinn, Normal Leadership is compared to the Fundamental State of Leadership as follows:

Normal – Self Focused, Internally Closed, Externally Directed and Comfort Centered; and Fundamental – Other Focused, Internally Directed, Externally Open and Purpose Centered.

Quinn also gives eight concepts/practices for entering the Fundamental State of Leadership:

Responsible Freedom,
Detached Interdependence,
Appreciative Inquiry,
Authentic Engagement,
Tough Love,
Adaptive Confidence,
Grounded Vision, and
Reflective Action.

This book has been very helpful to our STIR Task Force which has been doing some visioning for the presbytery. I would commend it to you as a worthwhile addition to your library.