

2016

## BOOK REVIEW: Thompson, C. (2013). Leadership Re-imagination: A Primer of Principles and Practices (Kindle DX version). Kingston, Jamaica: The Caribbean Leadership Re- Imagination Initiative.

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### Recommended Citation

Swapp, D. H. (2017). BOOK REVIEW: Thompson, C. (2013). Leadership Re-imagination: A Primer of Principles and Practices (Kindle DX version). Kingston, Jamaica: The Caribbean Leadership Re-Imagination Initiative.. *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education*, 3(3). Retrieved from <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/fire/vol3/iss3/6>

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**Abstract**

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**Keywords**

Leadership, Transformational Leadership

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imagination: A Primer of Principles and Practices (Kindle  
DX version)*. Kingston, Jamaica: The Caribbean Leadership  
Re-Imagination Initiative.**

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Dr. Canute Thompson's recent book, *Leadership Re-Imagination: A Primer of Principles and Practices*, offers a timely interrogation of leadership as exercised in organizations today. The book is foundational to an undertaking the author spearheads, namely the Caribbean Leadership Re-Imagination Initiative (CLRI), a unit of the Centre for Leadership and Governance at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. It also builds on previous work, *Towards Solutions: Fundamentals of Transformational Leadership in a Postmodern Era* (2009). In *Leadership Re-Imagination*, Thompson problematizes the status quo, invoking and reframing particular conceptualizations of what he perceives as forward-thinking managerial thinking and behaviours. The notion of "leadership re-imagination" advanced in the book is a particularly powerful imagery with which to challenge our thinking of management and organizational behaviour. And, while the author lives and works in the Caribbean and the book has direct relevance to practitioners, educators and researchers locating their work in this setting, the broader readership of *Forum for International Research in Education* would find that it makes an important contribution to the field of comparative and international education.

The book is divided into 12 chapters and includes a preface, foreword, afterword, and three appendices, and at the end of the chapters, the author poses questions to engage readers in critical, reflective thinking. In the preface, the author articulates the book's aim, offers a précis of the different sections, and conceptualizes leadership re-imagination. He also identifies the book's intended audience and explains the contexts in which two colleagues contributed to the foreword and afterword. In the appendices, he places three research instruments that can be used in organizations to assess re-imaginative leadership, organizational cohesiveness, and the impact of

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re-imaginative leadership on work behaviours. Chapter one then describes to readers how leadership re-imagination is taken up in the rest of the book. Here, the author makes the point that management practices and thinking have not kept up with current leadership approaches in the literature. Specifically, he problematizes and attempts to disrupt the belief that “only a limited number of people have the capacity to understand complex issues or that only some people have the right to have access to the relevant facts” (Chapter 1, para. 2). As a counter, he makes a case for a more “inclusive and participatory approach to leadership” in seeking to “promote creativity, accountability and renewal” (Chapter 1, para. 4). In defying what he describes as an undesirable status quo, the author encourages workers to exercise creativity and critical, independent thinking, arguing that these are essential qualities of the responsible team leader who is concerned with achieving meaningful engagement in order to realize the goals and work of the organization.

The rest of the book explores the theme of leadership re-imagination from various angles. Chapters two to four offer a comparative discussion of the relationship between this theme and that of transformational leadership and a description of some key thinkers who have influenced the author’s thinking on the notion of “imagination.” Chapter two is particularly appealing. Here, the author sells readers on the key tenets of leadership re-imagination, such as constructive engagement with others, love for change, advocacy and inspiration, bias to the larger agenda, and people empowerment. In chapters five to eight, he leads us through the practical application and implication of leadership re-imagination. In chapter nine, he reflects on several case studies of courageous leaders who engaged in transformational, revolutionary leadership approaches. Chapters ten to twelve attempt to clinch our thinking and application of leadership re-imagination: ten and eleven revisit the arguments of chapter three and reiterate the relationship between transformational and re-imaginative leadership; and, twelve describes the author’s pioneering work, the CLRI.

Overall, the book makes a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of the theory and practice of organizational leadership. It helps that the language is simple yet effective and that the book’s purpose is stated right at the start of the book: “This book attempts to challenge and renew our understanding of, and conversations about, how leadership is exercised” (Preface, para. 1). How the author then expounds on this aim is especially compelling in a postcolonial setting such as the Caribbean, in which authoritarianism remains pervasive in all walks of life. The author asserts that leadership re-imagination departs from conventional wisdom and acknowledges that those wedded to the status quo may find this concept discomfiting.

He also makes clear the subjectivities he brings to this discussion. Along these lines, his thinking is informed by both personal and professional experience and aligns with critical social justice. It is also easily apparent that his framework of inquiry is both theoretical and conceptual and has strong cultural and intellectual appeal. The framework is a reflective tool for readers, business students, aspiring managers, incumbent leaders, and other readers to evaluate and challenge leadership practice. Further, the author reasons from a position of interpretive understanding, acknowledging that although his biases are reflected in the book, they do not impede him from proffering reasoned perspectives on the issues at hand. While there is some undue overlap and repetition in the book, the writing is nevertheless very coherent and riveting, and the author builds on his central theme quite consistently throughout.

At the same time, the book has a few shortcomings. To begin, numerous punctuation, spacing, and spelling issues frustrate reading. Readers should also note that while the book’s

contribution is significant, some of the elements of leadership re-imagination the author takes up, such as inclusion, critical thinking and creativity, are not new to the field. A cynic might argue that this book is simply asking people to practice what has been advocated for decades in the management literature. In my view, however, Dr. Thompson's book presents an interesting, practical and compelling platform from which to launch a strike against the status quo; it takes up and demystifies re-imagined approaches to leadership in today's global climate, and I reiterate that the arguments would resonate particularly well in contexts such as the Caribbean where more traditional models of leadership are still dominant. Further, I regret that the author did not engage in a deeper analysis of how employee dissent can be addressed by the re-imaginative manager/leader, even though he acknowledges such lack of participation by some in the organization. Similarly, the author posits that shared vision is paramount to re-imaginative leadership and the success of the organization but falls short of discussing possible strategies to achieve such shared vision.

I also find problematic the author's choice of re-imaginative leaders for discussion. Several of them were either martyred or martyr-like, such as Jan Huss, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. As the author asserts, "the re-imaginative leader must be willing to persevere; must be willing to put in a big sacrifice – even that of his or her own life" (Chapter 9, "Martin Luther King, Jr.", para. 7). In this sense, then, he cannot be said to be speaking to the average business student, school manager, or firm employee, as few of us can ever reasonably expect to engage in this level of heroism. By using such examples of leaders, the author has relegated leadership re-imagination almost to a farce, and this portrayal diminishes the readers' enthusiasm and desire to aspire to something that, at best, seems unlikely.

There is also evidence in the book of unfounded, limited, and/or one-sided claims. Let us take, for instance, the discussion of accountability in chapter three ("Untying Charisma from Transformational Leadership," para. 3). Here, the author reduces this term to refer to the willingness to subject oneself to review by self and others. However, in this current environment of neoliberalism, the broader notion of accountability takes on more nuanced significance and can serve to stifle transformation and hinder re-imaginative leadership, as opposed to fostering these ideals. Similarly, the analysis of Maslow's higher order needs (Chapter 6) is lacking. The author implies that success will follow -- that re-imaginative leadership will flourish -- if employees' needs are met, but fails to address the unresponsive worker in every organization who fails to be moved by any and all leadership re-imagination initiatives. The complex nature of organizational behaviour belies such a simplistic attempt at persuasion. The author thus fails to present a balanced argument, or at a minimum, an acknowledgment of the limitations of his thinking in this regard. Two other examples are noteworthy. In chapter five (para. 2), the author asserts that the re-imaginative leader inspires others and this in turn improves performance, but again fails to offer any evidence, empirical or otherwise, in corroboration. Also, in chapter six (para. 7), he makes the claim that there are frightening and consequential effects of non-consultation without expounding or providing examples. In my view, this lack of attention to detail, by way of evidence or examples, somewhat weakens the book's thesis.

Nevertheless, these shortcomings do not invalidate the book's contribution to the field of comparative and international education. It makes for an easy and interesting read, and policy makers, professionals, aspiring leaders, and leadership course developers among others would find its contents quite informative to their work. I highly recommend *Leadership Re-Imagination* to readers of this journal.

**About the Author**

*Donna Hazel Swapp* received her B.Ed. (First Class Honours) in Educational Administration from the University of the West Indies and her M.Ed. (Gold Medal) in Educational Studies from Western University. She is currently a third year PhD candidate and faculty instructor at Western University where she researches school principals' work in Ontario and her native Grenada and teaches the course *Social Foundations: Teacher Professionalism and Schooling* in the B.Ed. program. Her research interests include school leadership practices and policy making, equity and social justice approaches to school leadership, politics and educational policy, and comparative and international education policy.