

Leaders Open Doors by BJ Gallagher

Bill Treasurer is one of my favorite business authors - not just because his books are good - but because he reminds me of the Wizard of Oz - his work always offers three important elements: brains, heart, and courage. His newest book, "Leaders Open Doors" is no exception. I've been eager to talk to Bill about it and he graciously made time for an interview.

BJ: I love the story behind your new book, "Leaders Open Doors." Would you share it with me again, for the benefit of my readers?

Bill: For over two decades I've been a senior ranking member of the Legion of Leadership Complexifiers (LLC). We're the folks who make our living out of plumbing, parsing, and peddling leadership development. We're well-intentioned, but we end up setting unrealistic expectations about what it means to be a leader. We expect leaders to be bold and calculated, passionate and reasonable, rational and emotional, confident and humble, driven and patient, strategic and tactical, competitive and cooperative, principled and flexible. Of course, it is possible to be all of those things ... if you're God!

It took my five-year old son, Ian, to bring me back to what matters most about leadership. Ian is a pre-schooler at The Asheville Montessori School in Asheville, North Carolina, where we live. Each Monday his teachers pick one person to be the "Class Leader" for the day.

One sunny afternoon Ian came bounding up the stairs proclaiming, "Guess what, Daddy? I got to be the Class Leader today!"

"Really? Class Leader? That's a big deal, little buddy. What did you get to do as the Class Leader?"

With seven simple words, Ian cut through two decades of studying and researching about leadership.

"I got to open doors for people!"

Ian's simple but profound insight helped remind me that leaders are simply creators of opportunity for others: they open doors for people.

In Section II of your book, you explain that there is not just one door that leaders open, but several: Proving Ground Door, Thought-Shifting Door, Door to a Second Chance, Door to Personal Transformation, and my favorite, Door to Your Open Heart. Can you explain each of them briefly?

Good leaders affect who we are. They alter us in some way. The six opportunity doors, as I call them, represent ways that a leader can help lift our standards and, potentially, change our life for the better. These doors are:

THE PROVING GROUND DOOR: Open-door Leaders tap into our deep desire to excel and achieve when they give us opportunities to prove ourselves to ourselves. They give us a shot at performing at a higher level.

THE THOUGHT-SHIFT DOOR: To keep us from being narrow or habitual in our thinking, Open-door Leaders help shift our perspective so we can apply our imagination more fully.

THE DOOR TO A SECOND CHANCE: The best lessons in life and at work are often the results of messing up. But the lessons are lost when our leaders judge or punish us too harshly. Open-door Leaders have a higher tolerance for mistakes, seeing them as great opportunities to learn and grow.

OPENING DOORS FOR OTHERS: Too many leaders replicate themselves when hiring senior executives, or assigning juicy opportunities. Open-door Leaders intentionally go out of their way to reach the people who are least like themselves in order to ensure that everyone has a fair shot.

THE DOOR TO PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION: The well-timed and good-intentioned feedback of an admired leader can change the entire trajectory of one's career. Open-door Leaders are often catalyst figures who bring about our own life and career transformations.

THE DOOR TO YOUR OPEN HEART: Over the course of your career you'll work with a lot of mediocre leaders. Ultimately what differentiates Open-door Leaders is we know (because they actively show) that they care about us and our well-being. Open-door Leaders reveal themselves to us, letting us see their own hardships, vulnerabilities, and human idiosyncrasies. In short, they are "real" with us.

As a diversity consultant, I'm particularly aware of the "closed doors" experiences by millions of women and people of color. I've been frustrated by this problem myself on occasion: White male colleagues open doors of opportunity for each other, but they don't seem to do it for women. Do you have any advice for us? Do we just have to break down walls if our leaders aren't willing to open doors for us? I know you wrote the book for leaders, but what can people who are not yet leaders do to advance their own careers?

Speaking as a middle-aged white male, our exclusion of women (and others) from opportunities has less to do with intentional duplicity and more to do with ignorance and obliviousness. In my case, I hadn't paid hardly any attention to the unique challenges that women face in the workplace until I was asked to speak at a conference of women leaders. I was being asked to deliver my presentation six times over the course of two days! I felt I owed it to the audience to not be ignorant to their challenges. And the more I researched about the unique challenges women face - the subtle and not-so-subtle ways men exclude them - the more interested I became.

I can tell you what wouldn't have caused me to be interested in this issue: somebody wagging a finger in my face. Shaming people into changing usually just results in resentment and defensiveness. I sometimes wonder if the people who are in the best position to illuminate issues of sexism and racism in the white male mind are other white

males who've already been illuminated. I do a considerable amount of speaking on 'Courageous Leadership for Women'; these days, and I always love it when there are some men in the audience. I'll often ask, "How many of you have daughters?" Those are folks I know I can reach. If not many have daughters, I'll say, "How many of you were born of a woman?"

Any final words of wisdom you'd like to share?

I think we've spent a lot of years being frustrated, disappointed, and disillusioned with our leaders. The whole idea of being a leader has become unattractive. I think it's time to lighten the leadership load and get leadership back to what's most essential: creating opportunities for those whom you are privileged to lead.

Effective leadership isn't about having power over people, it's about doing good for people. My five-year old son Ian had it right. Leadership is about opening doors for others.