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Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership

BOOK REVIEW

Christian T. K.-H. Stadtländer

Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership

Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal

(Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, California, U.S.A.; 2003; ISBN 0-7879-6427-1) U.S. \$38.00

Organizations are complex entities, often difficult to understand. Many factors make organizational life complicated, ambiguous, and unpredictable. The biggest challenge for managers and leaders is to find the right way to frame our organizations in a world that has become more global, competitive, and turbulent. The book by Bolman and Deal is a marvelous work on understanding how organizations function. It also provides practical suggestions for reframing organizations in order to adapt them better to current business realities.

Bolman and Deal focus on both management and leadership. The authors believe that organizations face several dangers. If, for example, an organization is overmanaged but underled, it will eventually lose any kind of sense of purpose and spirit. On the other hand, a poorly managed organization with a strong and charismatic leader may soar briefly only to experience a significant downfall shortly thereafter. Bolman and Deal suggest that we need today more people in managerial roles who can deal with organizational confusion and chaos by establishing order and finding simplicity; we need managers who love their work and organizations, and respect the people whose lives they affect. Leaders should be both artists and analysts, who are flexible and versatile enough to reframe their experience, as well as constantly seek new issues and discover possibilities. The authors also suggest that leaders and managers should view management more as a moral and ethical undertaking and should attempt to combine business realism with a passionate commitment to larger values and purposes.

In *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal concentrate mainly on organization theory's implications for practice. This makes their book not only extremely valuable for managers and future leaders of organizations but also for management consultants who advise managers and leaders on a variety of organizational issues. The authors use a four-frame model (structural, human resource, political, and symbolic), indicating that the same situation can be viewed in at least four different ways. Each of these frames is distinctive, coherent, and powerful, yet

when taken together, they help capture a comprehensive picture of an organization's situation. These frames can be used to identify what is wrong in organizations and what can be done to correct it.

The four frames have their own image of reality. Each frame can be characterized as follows: (1) The Structural Frame (metaphors: Factory or machine) emphasizes goals, specialized roles, and formal relationships; this frame can be used to organize and structure groups and teams to get results and fit an organization's environment and technology. (2) The Human Resource Frame (metaphor: Family) sees the organization through the lens of human needs, emotions, skills, and relationships; the goal is to align organizational and human needs to build positive interpersonal and group dynamics. (3) The Political Frame (metaphor: Jungle) has to do with power, conflict, competition, and organizational politics; this frame can be used to cope with power and conflict, build suitable coalitions and hone political connections, and deal with both internal and external politics. (4) The Symbolic Frame (metaphors: Carnival, temple, or theater) sees organizations as cultures, propelled more by rituals, ceremonies, stories, heroes, and myths than by rules, policies, and managerial authorities; the goal of this frame is to shape a culture that gives a purpose and meaning to workers, provides organizational drama for internal and external audiences, and build team spirit through ceremony and story.

The theories presented in this book were derived from research conducted with a variety of organizations from different sectors around the globe. Bolman and Deal analyzed organizations such as McDonald's in India, Citibank, Enron, Kodak, Harley-Davidson, Volvo France, NASA, the U.S. Air Force, Nordstrom, Harvard University, and the U.S. Congress in regard to individual aspects of the organizational frames. This approach makes the four-frame model relevant and applicable to any type of domestic and international organization.

Bolman and Deal believe that multi-frame thinking requires elastic movement that lies beyond narrow and mechanical approaches for understanding

organizations. When managers and leaders apply the holistic model, they view organizations through all four frames (people, power, structure, and symbols); this gives them an array of options and development opportunities. For example, people in organizations will improve on bargaining, become more open to training, learn how to celebrate success, and lose fear of reorganizing and reframing; they suddenly see the need to develop creativity, risk-taking, and playfulness; they will find the right questions and answers, and search for a deeper meaning and faith despite chaos and confusion; this eventually leads to the development of passionate, committed, flexible, and ethical, as well as understanding and responding managers and leaders who move the organization forward in a constantly changing business environment.

The book also provides the reader with information about important articles and books published in this field. A series called "Greatest Hits from Organization Studies" is displayed as sidebars throughout the book and represent valuable summaries of key ideas from the most influential works in the scholarly literature as well as summaries of management best-sellers. For this, the authors developed two lists: (1) The "greatest hits" as rated by scholars and (2) Best-sellers as represented in the list of Business Week. A summary of these lists is provided in the Appendix.

The book concludes with a section on improving leadership

practice by applying the four-frame model. More specifically, various issues related to the challenges of leadership are discussed, including integration issues, opportunities and perils, the distinct image of leaders and leadership, creating change, as well as ethics and spirit. Bolman and Deal then illustrate the process, art, and choice of reframing an organization by following a new principal through his first week in an urban high school. This high school is used as an example for an organization in trouble, similar to a corporation in crisis, a struggling hospital, or an embattled public agency. This case study essentially demonstrates how Bolman and Deal's theories would play out in practice by applying the four-frame model to a real world problem.

All in all, I found this book to be superbly written and well illustrated. It provides the reader with a 19-page list of cited references useful for further in-depth study of management topics related to organizational issues. This book is a useful text for managers and leaders who want to learn more about the functioning of organizations. It is also a superb guide for consultants who advise in organizations junior and senior managers, section leaders, and executives. Finally, this book is an excellent text for graduate students and scholars in business and education schools who are interested in learning how organizations function by studying the basics, cases, and applications of organizational theory and behavior.

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