
Book Reviews

Kenyon B. De Greene: The Adaptive Organization: Anticipation and Management of Crisis

1982, New York: Wiley, 394 pages.

The book is mainly written for top managerial personnel, middle-level managers, and students of business and public administration in order to improve their analytic and problem-solving capabilities. Its guided theoretical framework is a mix of general systems theory, cybernetic notions, and an intended universal field theory, encompassing field theory from physics to Kurt Lewin's field theory in social sciences.

The first of its eight chapters serves as an appetizer for the subsequent seven main courses by perusing what the author considers major concepts of relevance in organization theory. They range from force fields, entropy, Prigogine's dissipative structures to regulation, environments, organizational structures, and organizational crises (past, present, and future). The following chapter describes the shortcomings and relative merits of various organization theoretical and design approaches, e.g., behavioural, socio-technical, OR, information systems, dynamic and econometric modelling. Chapters three and four respectively deal with descriptive models of organizational growth and forecasting methods. The latter, by describing and discussing 'judgemental methods' (e.g., a fortiori analysis, delphi technique, cross-impact analysis) and comprehensive computer modelling (e.g., econometric models, systems dynamics, the Club of Rome and Bariloche models), constitutes a genuine primer in future-trends analysis techniques.

The fifth chapter introduces the reader to theoretical concepts that may help the understanding of the function and consequences of disequilibrium states of organizations and society at large, among others by presenting catastrophe theory and illustrating its theoretical notions in various complex man-machine systems failures (New York power blackout in 1977, Three Mile Island nuclear plant failure). Chapters six and seven provide analytical dimensions for understanding the external and internal environments of business enterprises. The concluding eighth chapter deals with design prerequisites of adaptive organizations, which are seen to be integrated in a systems theoretical framework of an input (information) — throughput (problem solving, decision making, control) — output (performance) model with cybernetic feedback-loops and boundary spanning units between the main functional units of the model. An appendix with 'diagnostic questions', organized according to the eight chapters and meant to improve the analytic capabilities of executives and their associates constitutes the dessert.

A central thesis of the author is that 'organizational crisis will continue to

Bernhard Wilpert
Institut für
Psychologie,
Technische Universität
Berlin, Berlin, BRD

increase in frequency, variety, number of different sources, magnitude and intensity, and integration and amplification of isolated and small disturbances into large fields of crises' (p. 35). Hence the author's claim that organizations must be adaptive and managers must adjust their analytical and managerial skills to the complexity of the causes of crises. This requires holistic models of the world that best could be found in, so to speak, meta-disciplinary theories such as a unified field theory of physical, social, and individual phenomena.

Reading the book I oscillated between fascination and frustration. Thoroughly fascinating is the audacity of the attempt to transfer recent insights of thermodynamics to organizational growth and failure. Frustrating was that this transfer failed to convince me that it was possible on the basis of truly isomorphic structures in both fields, and yet it somehow sounded plausible. It is fascinating to see an American colleague inform his readers succinctly and comprehensively about the current state of world-future modelling approaches and then see him drift into personal judgements about Californian politics. One is impressed by the author's acute feeling of urgency regarding future environmental problems for organizations (human resources, political, social, market) and is disappointed that industrial relations and participation problems occur only in passing or as an afterthought in the context of 'problem-solving groups' as a managerial technique. While the book is generally very well written, some parts, e.g., the presentation of catastrophe theory, are mathematically too abbreviated for the mathematically trained student and too technical for the general reader.

On the whole, the book is a salient attempt at raising the consciousness of managers to a level that might help to cope with future problems. Its theoretical framework lends itself to integrating or classifying a multitude of present and future organizational problems in their actual or likely interdependence. The concrete illustrations given and some of the topics left out suggest that the author focussed on American readers.

Richard O. Mason and Ian I. Mitroff: Challenging Strategic Planning Assumptions

1981, New York: Wiley. 324 pages.

Mason and Mitroff have spent over a decade, jointly and with other people, working on decision aids that use structured debates to clarify the assumptions made by policy makers. This book summarizes that work and makes it accessible to others. It provides specific instructions for two sets of decision support activities, and illustrates each method with several case examples. This practical core of the book — of primary interest to planners, consultants, and those who teach strategic decision making — is placed within a broader description of the kinds of complex problems which call for such methods, and

Anne S. Huff
Department of
Business
Administration,
University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign,
Champaign, USA