

BOOK REVIEW

Person-centered Leadership: An American Approach to Participatory Management

Jeanne M. Plas (1996).
Sage Publications, Inc.
ISBN (Paperback) 0-8039-5999-0

This is a surprisingly excellent book espousing person-centered leadership. It is surprising in that most books of this nature are intolerably shallow and generally miss the major point that it is the client who is the expert followed by the authors focus on methods and behavioral strategies. It is also surprising in that Jeanne Plas's conclusions are not derived from the basic theory of Carl R. Rogers. She cites Rogers only once but refers to three of his books; i.e., "On becoming a person," "Carl R. Rogers on personal power: Inner strength and its revolutionary impact," and "Freedom to learn in the 80s," and to the article, "Reflection of feelings" in the *Person-Centered Review*. Rather, her conclusions emerge from a whole array of literature which has roots "... in the early management literature, psychological theory and research, participatory management models, the general culture, and companies run by current corporate leaders who have experimented with these methods."

The book has three distinct parts which are: (1) Person-centered leadership: The fundamentals, the past, the future; (2) Person-centered leadership: The basics, the variations, the corporate chiefs who make it work; and (3) Making the changes that make a difference. In all of these sections, she frequently offers succinct summaries of her points. For example, in her introduction prior to Part 1, her concise summaries include the following:

The person-centered model

... does not just focus on workers; it focuses on the *individual* worker.

has "... to accomplish three things: (a) Fully understand and include workers' cultural norms and values. (b) Appreciate and support what workers want from their jobs and their lives. (c) Concentrate on one individual at a time."

has a dual focus which is upon "... (a) the creation of profit through the development of quality products and (b) the development of each individual who is part of the company."

incorporates executives who "... are coming to understand that managing person by person rather than problem by problem is a far more efficient way of not only putting out fires but also developing the forward momentum necessary to bring the company into a strategic position as the century comes to a close."

In Part one, her twenty-five concise summaries include:

A work environment that ignores feelings and expects people to pretend they do not have them-the positive or the negative-puts a premium on the control of feelings. Inevitably, this distances workers from the organization. Genuineness and passion are left at home.

Encouraging authenticity in the workplace is probably the most important thing that new leaders must do. Encouraging authenticity has passed the point of being an option that a manager may choose or choose to ignore.

Moving from rugged to related individualism is an example of an organizational response to the need to create new values and attitudes that can support new possibilities and demands.

Part 2 includes a few concise summaries but focuses more on guidelines in particular areas. For example, the author lists guidelines for leaders as she presents qualitative interviews of three “person-centered leaders.” Examples of the guidelines emerging from her sessions with James X. Mullen, Founder and President of Mullen Advertising are:

- Guideline 1: Treat all employees with complete respect.
- Guideline 2: Encourage individualism.
- Guideline 3: Share the truth.
- Guideline 4: Hire people who can think for themselves and then ask for and support risk taking.
- Guideline 5: Empowerment-all individuals are important members of the team.
- Guideline 6: Always keep your eye on the goal-a creative balance between individualism and teamwork.
- Guideline 7: Human feelings are just as important as human minds.
- Guideline 8: Related individualism means creating an environment where individualists can work together – exploiting their differences to the benefit of the company and themselves.
- Guideline 9: You can not expect individual to produce high quality-to produce their best – if you do not provide them a high-quality environment in which to work.
- Guideline 10: When individualists from all parts and levels of the company learn how to work within a creative, risk-taking team, genuine humility can become a reality that replaces arrogance, pushiness, and insecurity.

In Part 3, the author discusses the possibilities for transformation and the focus on self and associates with person-centered strategies. These are not, however, the usual cookbook strategies as she interfaces her presentation with such remarks as, “Authenticity must, by definition, always be a personal act, a personal decision. How else could it be authentic?” or, the idea that failures occur when the focus is on policy and process development “. . . rather than on the needs of a specific individual.” As the author further clarifies:

When these instances are viewed as associate complaints within a company culture that values complaints, a different effect occurs. People begin to develop relationships. Management person by person creates the kind of relationships that create a strong organization.

This book buttresses my personal view that the person-centered approach is far from dead in the United States. It, in fact, has a growing relevance for management in industrial, health care and business organizations that are on the verge of accepting a philosophy that focuses on empowerment of the individual.

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