

Book Review: *Images of organization* by Gareth Morgan

Mohammed Fahad Alsobaie

Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology, Organization Analysis, Western Michigan University, 1903 W Michigan Ave, Kalamazoo, MI 49008

Abstract

This book outlines a trajectory of leadership development from the battlegrounds of post-Renaissance Europe to the modern offices and factories of America, Japan, and Europe. We are given a detailed history of how leadership has developed through the ages with citations referencing great philosophers on the subject of organizational leadership, like Peter Senge and Edwards Deming. Overall, the author does provide evidence for his views and his book does seem to be well-researched, but he does not seem to fully comprehend everything that he reads or he only researches with the intention of assuaging his own confirmation bias. I will get into this criticism when I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of his book.

Keywords: Leadership, Implications for Superintendents, Strengths and weaknesses of the book

1. Overview

I think that I should mention up front that I did not like this book for many reasons and that this fact will reflect clearly in my review of Gareth Morgan's book, *Images of Leadership*. We are given Morgan's own personal interpretation of how organizational leadership has developed with the use of metaphors that span Darwin's evolutionary theory to theories on human psychology and the left-brain, right-brain dichotomy.

Morgan attempts to explain his thoughts on leadership organization using these metaphors with mixed results. He also provides a guide on common failures in organizations and his personal interpretation for why and how these failures occur. Overall, he does provide evidence for his views and his book does seem to be well-researched, but he does not seem to fully comprehend everything that he reads or he only researches with the intention of assuaging his own confirmation bias. I will get into this criticism when I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of his book.

2. Implications for Superintendents

If a superintendent were to make use of this book, I suppose that they would do so by looking at core message of Morgan's book, which is that there is a natural tendency within organizations towards entropy, and we should seek to strike a balance between the entropic forces that constitute the human spirit and the efficiency and organization required to effectively run an organization. Leaders need to realize that their subordinates are human beings and that if we do not treat them as such they will naturally rebel and cause the organization to disintegrate. He alludes to the idea that top-down hierarchies are a recipe for disaster, which I believe is how most educational leadership organizations are run anyway.

This book highlights weaknesses of bureaucracies and some strategies for working around these weaknesses. For example, he cautions against organizational structures, which are unresponsive to external forces. He also advocates creative thinking or, at the very least, flexibility in thought. He constantly references Japanese organizations as a foil to American ones and uses them as models to highlight flaws in American decision-making.

The core idea here that he is trying to get across to superintendents is that we might not have all of the answers, in fact, the answers we're looking for might not even be on the same continent we're living on. It is a call on the reader to be humble and acknowledge that entire societies might be prone to error. This reflects the historical paradigms regarding leadership that have ultimately been damaging and inefficient, such as the organizational models developed during the industrial revolution which treated workers like drones.

3. Strengths and weaknesses of the book

I think strength of this book is that Morgan is good at developing a sequential organization in the weaving of his tale on how he believes that organizations should be run. He does a good job at breaking up his thoughts into digestible parts for the reader and his paragraphs are generally easy to follow. For example, he starts with classical styles of leadership, which he compares to machines, then contrasts that with organic leadership with evolution as a backdrop, then he contrasts the dumb forces of nature with that of human conscience using manmade technology as a backdrop. It all flows in highly sequential fashion and I thought it was well done.

My main criticism of this book, and what I believe constitutes its fundamental weakness is that he seems to pick and choose convenient ideas from highly complex concepts in order to draw force conclusions with obtuse metaphors. For example, let us look at this metaphor using natural selection as a metaphor for organizational leadership. He states that some people like to look at organizations as biological organisms, but claims that they are wrong because not all organizations are subject to the forces of natural selection. In his refutation, he cites the fact that there is cooperation between organisms in nature and that not all interactions have to be competitive. While this is certainly true, we must take into account that collaboration is used as a tool for *survival*. All because two organisms collaborate does not mean that they have stopped competing against selective forces. In fact, they might be teaming up because such a strategy helps them better cope with said selective force.

He also states that a problem with looking at organizations as biological in nature is that this interpretation is subject to becoming ideological. Why this is a problem unique to a biological perspective is never explained. Technically, I could probably take a rigid ideological stance on any topic I wanted if I were a person predisposed to this kind of thinking. This seems to me more like a problem of an individual than an ideology. I think the reason why he poses this “problem” in the first place is because of the fact that he is trying to keep the book as politically correct as possible and does not want to risk alienating any readers by taking too deterministic a stance when it comes to laying out his views on leadership. Unfortunately, this causes the content of his book to suffer when his ideas are placed under scrutiny.

Given such a glaring misunderstanding of a basic scientific concept caused me to question Morgan’s credibility very quickly and very early into this book. It is ironic that he is emphasizing to readers that we should not be myopic when assessing leadership organizations, while his metaphors are painfully myopic and sophomoric. You might think that this is an isolated incident in the book, but it is a recurring problem, and a foundational problem at that. He builds the rest of his book off of the idea that organizations do not operate in purely competitive environments when he never adequately refutes this assertion and continues to plow on despite it.

4. Conclusion:

I think the most valuable things I took away from this book were the anecdotes that Morgan provides throughout it. I thought the stories about Japanese companies, Frederick the Great, and McDonalds made for an interesting read that gave me insight into how these companies operate. For example, the anecdote describing the Japanese and American bankers, and how they both believed neither one knew how to measure objectives properly was both funny and extremely interesting. That this would have actually occurred under study is almost hard to believe, but I think it highlights how many countries experience vast culture gaps when it comes to business. As an international student, I understand these cultural gaps all too well.

I do not mean to come off as confrontational in my review of this book, but I simply have a hard time giving it praise. It was not a pleasurable read for me for the reasons I described above and I thought that the source material from Peter Senge is much better as it is more specific and clear. I do not believe I would recommend this book for others to read or purchase as I do not think that many in educational leadership will gain something from this book that they could not gain from reading other authors in this field.

References

Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. CA: Sage Publications Inc, ISBN-10: 1412939798