

Book Review

Barry Dym and Harry Hutson.

Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations.

Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005.

By Howard A. Doughty

Recent interest in non-governmental organizations has been growing in many areas of politics and government. The viability of NGOs in terms of their capacity to provide important public services has long been a matter of record. Accordingly, as Western democracies, under what we may hope is the temporary ideological domination of neoliberalism, retreat from their responsibilities to regulate corporate activities and to improve the quality of life of their citizens, NGOs have stepped up and helped maintain what is now known as civil society.

The roles of NGOs are diverse. Some groups take explicitly political positions and organize public dissent over issues from environmental degradation to the violation of civil liberties by the authorities of the national security state. Others take up where state agencies leave off, providing everything from counseling to former inmates in the criminal justice system to food and health care to international victims of natural disasters. From Greenpeace to Doctors without Borders, well intentioned people seek to relieve suffering and promote what they deem to be progressive policies. In some cases, they have been so successful that governments have become concerned that these apparent newcomers to the public policy field are actual threats to the legitimate authorities. In others, of course, the legitimate authorities are quite happy to divest themselves of a number of social responsibilities and pass them on to “faith-based groups” and others who will pursue an approved ideological line while assuming much of the financial and organizational burden themselves.

Whether perceived as “progressive” and possibly troublesome or as “reactionary” and possibly troublesome, there is no doubt that NGOs have taken a robust and seemingly permanent place in contemporary society. It would, of course, be well to remember that NGOs are nothing new. It is the state and, more so, the private corporation that have short pedigrees in human cultural evolution. Today’s NGOs are, after all, merely the modern extensions of social arrangements that pre-date the emergence of modernity and, for that matter, the emergence of what we are commonly pleased to call civilization. It was, we should also recall, the job of religious institutions to provide hospitals and schools and to minister to the poor long before bureaucracies were established to treat the sick, teach the children and minimally redistribute income to ensure that the poverty did not become so widespread and visible that it undermined tourism, nor so hurtful that it might provoke public protest.

Today, NGOs are seen as balancing institutions that seem somehow more populist, if not necessarily more democratic, than governments and more socially conscious, if not necessarily more accountable than the private sector. However they may be viewed and however they view themselves, NGOs are plainly here to stay.

Sizing up their potential for promoting social cohesion or social change and assessing their potential to influence both public sector and private sector institutions is a formidable task worthy of the best efforts of political scientists; analyzing their internal workings is no less daunting. This, nonetheless, is the work taken up by Barry Dym and Harry Hutson. They do it well.

Deftly moving from case studies to theoretical and conceptual issues and back to specific instances and circumstances, Dym and Hutson construct an approach and an analysis that would be equally useful in graduate courses in organizational development and leadership and on the reading shelf of senior managers and practitioners in NGOs. In fact, both public and private sector executives would do well to consult *Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations*, if only to observe a somewhat unconventional understanding of what leadership means in the dynamic world of NGOs rather than in the often static environment of more conventional governmental and business structures.

The authors are skeptical of the notion that leadership involves specific and wholly transferable skills. Having spent most of my working life in education, I quietly seethe (and occasionally erupt) when some administrative nincompoop lets forth with the admonition that “a good teacher can teach anything”; I am sure others have a similar reaction when some managerial huckster insists that a good manager can manage anything. Both these ideas presume that there is a stock list of personal qualities that makes for a good teacher, a good manager or, for that matter, a good auto mechanic or a good farmer. Now, of course, there must be some common qualities to describe each of these and any other occupational categories. Teachers are best if they don’t despise students and farmers must be willing to spend time outdoors; however, there is no successful Platonic archetype of the perfect manager or mechanic. Context matters.

By examining the stages that growing NGOs pass through on their way to success or oblivion, Dym and Hutson explain how different sorts of attitudinal and skill sets are important at different stages of organizational evolution. Culture, community and “goodness of fit” between leadership methods and institutional goals are emphasized. The necessity of balancing the moral enthusiasm of NGO members with the requirements of rational planning and administration is handled with extraordinary insight and genuine respect for managers, staff and volunteers in a variety of settings.

What ultimately emerges from this fine book is an appreciation of the complexity and variability not only among NGOs but within them as they transform themselves or are transformed through periods of growth and maturation. In the end, the uniqueness of NGOs is acknowledged but, in many respects, it is not as dramatically different from government and business as might be imagined. In all cases, preoccupation with rules and an obsession with the corporate cult of the CEO are subjected to rigorous criticism as human organizations are shown to be more organic than artificial, mechanical arrangements.

The implications of the principal arguments for innovation in general are plentiful. They include considerations of words such as charisma and bureaucracy.

One important point that this book makes is that great leadership implies massive followership, which may be useful at the outset of any organization. The heroic figure, adored by subordinates and openly committed to some almost transcendental goal can be inspirational and has been more than adequately explained in Max Weber’s ideal type of the charismatic leader. The problem is that very few people comprehend how much the notion of charisma has been diminished through popular usage. Properly understood, it means a “gift of grace,” a divinely furnished (and inherently unstable) capacity to bring a community through a crisis in which rules have been destroyed, circumstances rendered chaotic and traditions and customs put asunder. By sheer force of personality, the charismatic leader wins confidence and, if successful, brings the community to a new equilibrium, at which time charisma becomes dangerous and must be replaced by lawful, bureaucratic authority if the community is to survive.

Even so, there is a tendency to believe that outstanding individual qualities in senior personnel are essential to the innovative capacities of an organization. Tonic in the beginning, the role of supreme leader becomes toxic with age. Surrendering the position of “top boss,” delegating authority and democratizing the workplace are essential to continuous change and improvement. In the former Yugoslavia, Marshall Tito was such a leader; that is partly why it is the “former” Yugoslavia. What awaits Cuba after Castro may also be testimony not merely to the lack of adequate succession but to the entire issue of authoritarianism as it works wonders in conditions of confusion but becomes self-defeating when the crisis has passed.

Second, the authors pay heed to the naturally emerging processes of stabilization and maturity. Once an organization has been brought into being or radically transformed, it is essential for its ongoing success to make its mandate, procedures and governing philosophy over into something resembling normalcy. Spectacular achievements — especially in the launching or salvaging of an exhilarating and edifying initiative — are horribly difficult to sustain. The bureaucratization of the imaginative is a necessary feature of any endeavor that does not want to be remembered for a fabulous flash of brilliance but few enduring effects. The tricky part here is to retain flexibility and sensitivity in an organization that has been well launched and must now turn its original vision into an effective routine. By explaining in sensible language the concrete indicators of organizational evolution and providing insightful examples of institutions that maintained fluidity of movement and thought rather than permitting the ossification of once supple creativity and action, Dym and Hutson show how much of seemingly inevitable structural pathology can be forestalled.

Finally, although there has been a subtext in much writing about innovation that celebrates involvement and participation in strategic thinking, decision making and policy implementation and evaluation, the record has been spotty at best. For many managers, workplace participation is about enthusiasm, not democracy. Power sharing is normally limited in practice to a fancified corporate suggestion box. Nonprofit organizations are among the few that have displayed a measure of consistent sincerity with respect to what is still called employee empowerment and meant something more than collective good will by the term.

Dependence on overweening overseers, dictatorial directors, supercilious supervisors and mendacious micromanagers is a chronic problem with unhealthy organizations. Such dyspeptic creatures not only ruin working life for employees but ultimately interfere with the quality of product and service provided to citizens and consumers alike. The study of NGOs yields no fundamentally alternative approach to human activities; their need, however, to deal with a wider range of challenges both in terms of their purpose and their practical problems yields a wider range of organizational options (and restrictions) than commonly confront government, commerce and industry. As a result, just by momentarily putting one’s feet into the shoes of a person with the responsibility to make an often idealistic program work in the real world can be an enlightening moment. In observing new things through new eyes, it is possible to catch oneself in the “act” of seeing — an auspicious opportunity for everyone who is sensible enough to be unimpressed with the “cult of the CEO,” sensitive enough to be wary of rigidity, and open enough to new possibilities to give some small measure of democracy a fighting chance.

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