

Book Review

Philip A. Foster

The Open Organization: A New Era of Leadership and Organizational Development
Burlington, VT: Gower Publishing Company

Reviewed by: Howard A. Doughty

Philip A. Foster's résumé could hardly be more clearly stereotyped. His master's degree in Organizational Leadership emphasized "mentorship" and "coaching." His doctorate is in Strategic Leadership emphasizing "strategic foresight." He is "Thought Leader in Business Operations and Strategic Leadership" and an adjunct professor at Middle Tennessee University. He has worked in the public and in the private sector including "13 years as an executive in manufacturing, media and business consulting". He caps it off by telling us that he has experience "delivering curriculum at both [the] corporate and university level."

Call me "old-fashioned" (a charge to which I cheerfully plead "guilty"), but I have seen advertisements like this too often. They typically precede or sum up a pitch by a "motivational speaker" or an alleged "futurist" who will turn up at an employer-sponsored event that promises to give employees from the middle-management to shop-floor (or online) workers a PowerPoint procedural about the frenzied world of organizational change and the "challenges" that face them in a volatile, globalized, high-tech environment in which "tech-savvy" teenagers seem to come from another planet and—whatever their origins—have enormous amounts of information at their finger-tips and extraordinary demands to make of the people whose task it is to provide them with "services" for which their appetite is unlimited. (They also seem to have trouble doing simple arithmetic without a calculator, finding Bolivia or a map or guessing when World War II ended.

Connect these observations to a market mentality in which the "customer is always right" and we quickly understand that anyone who chooses to think too deeply about the implications of any policy or program is predismised as a "dinosaur" and defined as shockingly obsolete in the world of Information Technology on super-steroids.

Out of this welter of banality and misinformation (so to speak) have come hundreds of books, thousands of articles and uncounted numbers of second-rate "experts" who take it upon themselves to crunch explosive, transformational technological and organizational changes growing at an "exponential" rate into chunks of marketable wisdom. Such geniuses seem to create a new "paradigm" about every other week (usually on a Tuesday morning). What they are peddling (to be kind) is mainly show business.

Nonetheless, naïve leaders of third-rate institutions are routinely hooked on the next "new big thing" and eagerly embrace it lest they dawdle, miss the chance and find themselves written off as an administrative eohippus in a stable of frisky pure-bred stallions gleefully dancing to the tune of the "very next new big thing." At first glance, Philip A. Foster's new book looked very much like a standard, garden-variety instance of this rather depressing sort of product.

Normally, I'd have chucked the thing into the rotating file of amateurish and unsound contributions to the literature on careerism. It seemed like a book that could be quickly and easily read and would equip readers with the vocabulary that would draw notice at the next departmental meeting, regional retreat or senior corporate board room and then penciled in for a promotion to whatever their next step might be.

Still, I don't like to toss anything aside without giving it a fair chance. So, I flipped to the Table of Contents and to the Index to see what, if anything, was up. (The lack of an index, of course, is the death kiss for almost any book other than a murder mystery or the kind of romance novel that commonly pollutes the book racks in the smaller airports.)

An Open Organization is simply a method of self-leadership in which individuals participate in the movement of an organization from their strengths.
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When I tried to give Dr. Foster's *opus* a quick once-over, I was strangely entangled. It was not exceptional except in that it was exceptionally unexceptional. It offered a sort of template, an almost Platonic "form" or archetype of its species. It had just about everything. What's more, I found myself reluctantly nodding in agreement with what I took to be his underlying theme. Tugged a little more than a little, but not past its limits of elasticity, Foster presented ideas that bordered on house-broken anarchism and at least a tacit acceptance of Marx's theory of alienation (without all that upsetting language about revolution). I was intrigued.

The Open Organization begins with a breezy cruise through organizational theory (two paragraphs on "systems theory" and three on "theories X, Y and Z"). It provides a history of leadership that identifies: Organization 1.0, presumably from Adam, Eve and Lucy the far-famed Australopithecine to the Industrial Revolution (King David gets honourable mention); Organization 2.0 from the early 1800s to the late 1990s, in which Frederick Taylor's "scientific management" looms large, but Harry Braverman's complaints about the degradation of work in the twentieth century goes unmentioned); and, of course, Organization 3.0 which is here, now, everywhere around and probably in us. This romp concludes with a case study of "Git-Hub" which is all about "Creating Awesome" (I originally read it as "Get Help," but that's a matter between me and my analyst.)

In the second part, Foster provides the "elements" of an open organization.

It's amazing what creative people can come up with when there's nobody there telling them what to do.

For Foster, open systems are mainly about communications. Like most gentle liberals, he appreciates the difficulties that arise from distorted communications, secret communications, suppressed communications and compartmentalized communications. He understands that organizations that are rigidly hierarchical cannot adapt to new circumstances and cannot maximize the potential of its members either in times of stability when potential talent is wasted or in times of turbulence when failing to draw on all facets of an organization can be lethal.

Open Organizations are not lawless frontiers but very much rules-driven and purposeful.

At the same time, Foster never takes his empirical or normative eye off the main purpose of Open Organizations, which is of course the same as the main purpose of closed organizations; namely, the survival and flourishing of the *organization*. He lists some principles that ensure that creative energy is encouraged and waste or, worse, negativity is discouraged. He is open (so to speak) to the flattening of hierarchies, but not to full-scale democratization which, in the private sector, would mean worker-ownership. He is nothing else if not loyal to the shareholders.

Like Keynesian economics in relation to capitalism, the point is not to destroy an exploitative economic arrangement (as many foolish corporatist ideologues claim), but to ensure that profit-generating relationships are maintained by means of necessary adaptation featuring an active government, mixed public-private investment and the provision of a social safety net as a means to sap the strength of dissent.

As I said, Foster approaches the borderline between corporate control and anarchism; but, he never contemplates crossing it; he appreciates Marx's concept of alienation, but he has no intention of eliminating it, merely of containing its consequences. Like Abraham Maslow before him, he is a humanist insofar as he is willing to diagnose organizational pathologies and recommend ways in which human communicative needs can be satisfied and individual human potential can be released—not by radically restructuring the employer-employee relationship, but by prudently loosening, but never letting go of the leash.

A concluding section considers “the twenty-first century organization.” Here it is made plain that the open organization is a tactic, perhaps a strategy but not a normative goal. Foster, for example, knows that globalization will bring employers and employees into close contact with people from other cultures, both domestically in emerging multicultural societies and internationally with representatives from previously exotic cultures. Here, then, the open organization promotes “cultural literacy,” but mainly in order to learn the strange customs of others in order to do business with them better.

When we know how someone thinks we are able to better lead them in a context that they will understand.

At stake, then, is no inherent humanistic cross-cultural virtue, just a clever way to maximize profits. It is plain that Foster is not seeking or recommending a way to set aside authoritarian, hierarchical structures of power. Authoritarian, hierarchical structures of power are not criticized *per se*. In fact, my introductory perusal of the index revealed only a passing dismissive mention of bureaucratic “red tape” and no reference whatever to Max Weber (1921).

Foster seems mainly concerned with questions of organizational adaptation. He asks readers whether or not it is prudent to “go open.” He addresses concerns with resistance to openness (mainly, but not exclusively, from managers who jealously guard their powers and privileges). He then introduces the idea of “scenario analysis,” the capacity to imagine, prepare for and adapt to new conditions that are expected to be ever more unruly in the near, medium and distant future.

Nowhere could I find a serious consideration of the *real* lives of human capital (formerly known as people). Nowhere, as well, could I find mention of the deep, expanding, toxic and unsustainable gaps between rich and poor (people and nations) that, in the absence of remedial measures, are bound to create systemic problems for politics and governance of a sort that may augur ill for the changes Foster has in mind. Indeed, firmer, harsher hierarchical structures of the sort preferred in military formations and mental health facilities could be as much on the horizon as open organizations. A (post)capitalist future in which universal education will train people for non-existent jobs and “careers” consisting of an endless series of precarious and temporary contract jobs does not seem to cloud Foster’s vision. On the other hand, “scenario analysis” is likely to be the “next new big thing.” In fact, I can almost hear the click of Foster’s keyboard as he prepares his manuscript for publication.

Scenario analysis is a skill that human capital must acquire if they are to compete in the twenty-first century.
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One other matter comes to mind. The public sector fell all over itself in the past three or four decades as it scrambled to mimic the private sector under the dominant sway of neoliberal ideology. As a result, public employees correctly sensed that demonstrated loyalty in the workplace no longer went both ways. Low wages had been the price of job security, but such reciprocity ceased to work as the key to cordial relations between management and labor. Instead, large-scale unionization and the emergence of public sector unions as the strongest and most militant element in organized labour presented dilemmas to public sector leaders that they seem not to understand fully even today. Or, as I heard one lower level clerk shout at her befuddled manager: “I’m tired of being ‘civil’ and I’m nobody’s ‘servant’!”

In any case, assuming that there is something of substance to the fashion of open organization, how will the public sector deal with it? Foster himself gives short shrift to the public sector. It is, he implies, especially resistant to change. It is bound by externally imposed policy priorities which are apt to be reversed whenever a new political party takes control. It lacks the autonomy to innovate in the absence of a broad mandate from its political masters. And, no matter how much cunning Deputy Ministers or otherwise highly placed civil servants may be able to manipulate their always temporary “superiors,” the elitist, patrician tone of public services has been largely corroded by decades of the “new public management” and importation of “business” rules and rhetoric.

Now, in light of the opinions expressed here, I am aware that readers may wonder why I chose to review this book. Over the past four decades, I have written almost 500 book reviews in journals as diverse as the *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* and *The Canadian Studies Bulletin* at one end and *The Review of Radical Economics* and *The Socialist Studies Bulletin* at the other. I have, however, rarely written a negative review unless it was of a book that I thought to be enormously overrated and yet unaccountably popular, and I am pleased to say that there have been remarkably few of them. Mostly, I have tried to bring excellent books to the notice of attentive readers who might need no more than a small nudge to get them to read a book that is truly worthwhile but, perhaps, a little in the shadows.

I have seen myself as a promoter of good work far more than a critic of bad. As I have tried to explain, Foster's is not a hideously poor book and, to my knowledge, it has not been vastly overrated. It is also not the kind of book I'd regularly recommend, although it is commendable as an example of its sort and no doubt appealing to people who like that sort of thing. It is, in fact, a passable and occasionally interesting volume that touches on a number of important issues (and misses many more).

The whole notion of "open organizations" is, in any case, tremendously important *provided* that the discussion of such matters takes into account foundational political, economic and cultural contexts and causes. Such books have been around for a long time. Von Bertalanffy (1968) and Bateson (1972) are among the heavier books that showcased the possibilities of cybernetic thinking and Kariel (1968) and Beer (1974) are just two of the relatively light, but engaging volumes that introduced me to some of the exciting possibilities in the field over forty years ago. Foster, I must acknowledge, is familiar with at least some of this work and, for example, gives an approving nod to the "father of general systems theory." If, therefore, he bridges a gap and induces readers to explore further, I am happy to endorse him and I am happier for them.

About the Reviewer:

Howard A. Doughty teaches cultural anthropology and political economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com.

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