

## Book Review

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey  
*An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*  
New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2016

Reviewed by Donald R. Officer

In most organizations nearly everyone is doing a second job no one is paying them for—namely, covering their weaknesses, trying to look their best, and managing other people's impressions of them. There may be no greater waste of a company's [or department's] resources.

— Robert Kegan & Lisa Laskow Lahey

I recall a time when I was performing at top form by every measure and most accounts, but was nonetheless served with a less than stellar annual review that came out of nowhere. The temporary manager, who offered it up, claimed his decision reflected “a few weaknesses.” This imbecile, a former auditor, had gone back to a hopelessly inappropriate old job description for his assessment. He was, as another manager described it, simply “playing the game” while ignoring the essential higher priority tasks I had completed effectively on time. As Robert Kegan or Lisa Lahey put it, he was just “... doing a second job.” Apparently, by meeting the unit's most critical needs, I wasn't.

Imagine an organization where serious personal growth contributing to organizational development is truly appreciated. Unfortunately, given the wasteful play-acting that goes into the standard unpaid second shift, such organizations are few and far between. More commonly, we find truly efficient transparency in small collectively committed businesses or in teams where something extraordinary drives or forces colleagues to seek a close consensus. Think of platoons in a war zone or creative start-ups producing innovative products for demanding customers.

Sadly, tight-knit groups are exceptional in cultures where everyone thinks short-term. With this form of “agile” mindset prevailing, working environments are not always supportive of development on the job. New hires are expected to come fully trained to a buyer's market. On the other hand, employers are simultaneously suspicious of the career intentions of overqualified recruits settling for entry-level work. Psychologist Adam Grant recently posted a cartoon to his LinkedIn page showing a job interviewer advising an overqualified candidate to return when he'd forgotten a few things. With such short-term focus, well established development principles like learning transfer from one skill set to another are easily dismissed while “exotic” techniques like career coaching are customarily reserved for the managerial elite.

Many of the reflexively discouraging ways we do business (the same applies to government and non-profits) have problematic consequences for the future. How is that? In their

2016 book, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, long-time research and business practice collaborators Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey make the pointed observation that most organizations underperform for the same embarrassing reason quoted at the start of this review, not exactly a strengths-based path to optimum performance, but based on over 30 years of the authors' closely observed collaborative fieldwork.

When you consider the implications of a deliberately *deceptive* cultural environment, two thoughts come to mind. First, how difficult it must be to assess the effective effort directed to the real business of the organization. Second, how hard it must be to pinpoint and address the critical pain points in the operation. From what we know about motivational psychology, such a state of affairs will taint every explicit statement of encouragement or acknowledgment since such language will not be trusted and may serve to mask more negative or suspicious feelings.

One approach to addressing suboptimal organizational climates is to frame the issue as an employee engagement problem. Surveys suggest disengagement infects about two-thirds of the workforce. How could management make the daily grind more enticing or at least bearable? One technique is called gamification. The name is a bit misleading, but accurate enough if by gamification we mean playing with an element of competition to keep things lively. The playground could be virtual, board-based, physically interactive with movement through shared spaces ("embodied" as facilitators like to say), or involve any number of mental jousting formats.

The idea behind gamification lies in taking the worker's mind out of a frustrating, sometimes not so safe, highly politicized office setting and into a temporary world, where early dysfunction is a learning tool, not an existential hazard. This is a bit like using a flight simulator which, come to think of it, is classic gamification. Gaming methodologies have merit if only in making work feel less like school and more like recess.

Other popular and positive tools for resetting engagement include mindfulness with its short track to flow and the whole suite of positive deviance tools listed in valuable books like *Profit from the Positive*, *Awakening Compassion at Work* and *Grateful Leadership*. Happier, more respectful workplaces are necessary for both optimal satisfaction and top performance. However, as necessary as positive infusions are, they do not guarantee best results.

Management theorist Frederick Herzberg (1987) discussed what matters to us in our work decades ago, foreshadowing the science of happiness and flourishing. Herzberg developed a two-factor theory to explain employee satisfaction as a prerequisite for full engagement. He called those factors *hygienic* and *motivating*. Herzberg's point was that staff would not be happy for long without meeting basic needs such as adequate wages, working conditions and key benefits. However, he reasoned that, even if these "hygiene" needs were fully satisfied, employees would not stay engaged indefinitely if they lacked a deeper sense of purpose. Success at "playing the game" off line builds applicable competence and might seem to count, although it is obviously a regressive substitute for real purpose.

Where does real purpose come from? It could emerge from a deep commitment to the job's importance or through the crafting or reshaping of the work by the current job holder to meet a high personal standard of meaning. It might also come from being part of a larger social

enterprise such as building a worthy institution, implementing a social program or fighting a just war. These are meaningful ends, if sometimes by default, but do they invariably fulfill individual purposes? This is where Kegan's theory of lifelong development comes into play. To understand it, we need to examine the work of an important developmental psychology pioneer.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss biologist and psychologist, Jean Piaget, began to observe children systematically, starting with his own, in their attempts to make sense of the world. He saw that through interactions with their surroundings they developed explanation frameworks. He noted that, while children were absorbent learners, only after experience accumulates and is assimilated could children accept abstract concepts easily understood at later ages and stages.

Piaget's scheme begins with what he calls the sensorimotor stage of infants and toddlers, proceeding through to the formal operations level of mid-adolescence. Here, says Piaget, cognition reaches its final form as the individual is now deemed capable of deductive reasoning. If this model, were extended as a linear graph, we would see a flat line starkly indicating no meaningful growth after early adulthood. This applies to everyone. Granted, teenagers might flatly endorse this model in assessing their elders, but does it really jibe with the evidence?

Great work was done by Erick Ericson, who mapped out the challenges that life imposes as crises that anticipate a developing maturity. Likewise, researcher Albert Bandura has documented how people continue to learn throughout their lives by watching one another and recognizing how they shape the environment even as they are shaped by it. So, refinement, codifying, modifying and a host of other competency improvements may emerge, but is there growth in understanding?

As early as the late eighties, Robert Kegan began to notice that, while some people mimicked Piaget's schema and essentially plateaued in early adulthood, others underwent a whole range of learning that offered more than new skills or knowledge acquisition. Not only do some people begin to know more things over the long haul but, like Piaget's children, they start to understand the world differently. It's not just how much more they knew, but *the different ways* they came to appreciate what they were learning.

As Kegan and Lahey observed in their clients and field work, perceptual changes make an enormous difference in outcome wherever they are cultivated. The model they saw emerging centred on transformative ways of picturing the self. Kegan simplifies Piaget's early childhood categories into an impulse and reflex-driven start followed by an emerging needs and wishes structure coming later in childhood where others in the child's world are recognized though more usually considered for the impact they have on the child than regarded as unique persons in themselves.

This is where the Kegan theory gets interesting. We all recognize lingering bits of underdone, immature relationship styles among colleagues, neighbours and well-known public figures. For some of us they persist or return at moments of stress well into adulthood. Mentally and emotionally, if not physically, we often reserve the right to exercise the Peter Pan option. Growth, the invisible kind, is a choice. True, it is hardly surprising that a desire to overcome awkward adolescent interactions drives us to achieve the socialized mind of post-adolescence.

Many settle for that. You can carve out a decent enough life if you can just get along. Kegan identifies this achievement as the third order.

The fourth order, the self-authoring mind, represents a subtler but very real change in how we view everything. More aware of others' needs and the intricacies of relationships, the expanding self-authoring self begins to understand the world as part of a system. Confidence in personal identity leads to willing accommodation and appreciation of others.

In Kegan's estimation, the fifth order—the self-transforming mind—is unusual in individuals under 40, usually deepening with passing decades as awareness of differences in identities, ideologies and systems shows up with the acquisition of fuller life experience. Be cautioned though, to attain this level you really have to want to go there! Bear this challenge in mind as we examine the special drivers in the deliberately developmental organization (DDO).

Anyone familiar with the recent history of work and the framework of modern organizations will see that the shared assumption about workforce members imitates Piaget's flat line. If you can do the job and fit into the culture you are not expected to change beyond a few necessary skills upgrades or adjustments. Acquisition of these is not always easy, but except along a narrow band, few present true stretch goals. Unless you are slotted for leadership, get used to staying up to date on technology and specific trends HR insists are currently important, but don't look for much else.

Adult learners, we are told, are only interested in knowing what they need to know to get the job done now. We are to call what can still be mastered after Piaget's plateau is attained, training; the theory behind it, andragogy. Development, at best, should be preparation for the next job. However, Kegan and Lahey, armed with an awareness of possibilities across the full spectrum of a career take a very different view using a positive, growth-oriented mindset. Most encouraging for the future and especially for those of us who recognize the possibilities of positive psychology in the world of work is that several organizations are already practicing a deliberately developmental approach to all their employees. In *An Everyone Culture*, the three companies showcased each demonstrate not only positive individual results by every important measure, but also exemplary organizational outcomes.

The authors describe all three organizations as deliberately developmental, but apart from that key designation they differ extensively. "Next Jump" is an exceptional e-commerce tech company; "Decurion" is immersed in multiple branches of cutting-edge (or neatly-spliced) cinematic entertainment. Operating in a totally different environment, "Bridgewater Associates" operates two hedge funds controlling \$165 billion in global investments.

While each of these businesses represents a vastly different knowledge pool, the level of excellence required to keep each of them operating at the top of their game requires similarly unrelenting investment in the development of individuals as well as team centred interpersonal and transformative understanding. Without a DDO mindset it can't happen. How many areas of government can you think of where consequences are at least as important or falling short even puts at risk the long-term future of the body politic?

You may have heard of Ray Dalio and his best-selling book, *Principles* (2017). Dalio is the founder of Bridgewater Associates, a Wall Street firm that weathered the great recession without serious losses. Bridgewater is credited by *The Economist* for making more money for its investors than any other hedge fund in history. But if you read *Principles* or watch Dalio's TED Talk (2018) you will learn that he considers Bridgewater's real achievement to be the creation of a culture of "radical transparency" made possible by deep mutual trust, an outcome of deliberate development. Bridgewater's open secret is the construction of strong, but deeply deliberated consensus over decisions that matter. Members of this firm, like those of so many DDOs speak freely, with conviction, and are always taken seriously.

The same fearless attitude born of unwavering commitment to psychic safety leads Next Jump staffers continuously to ask, "What opportunities will there be to practice my backhand?" insider code for overcoming each individual's greatest difficulty. The supportive Next Jump culture creates a robust safety net permitting everyone in it to take on steep challenges that teach deep self-knowledge. This kind of learning may be humbling, although it is assuredly bonding.

Likewise, process unfolds in Decurion known for its "axioms" or tested company values: "Decurion's axioms are statements about how we choose to view and live our lives. They are decisions about how we act together. They reflect a choice to see wholeness and possibility rather than separateness and trade-offs."

The preceding quotation from "Decurion's Ends and Means" internal document might look dogmatic in bald print. However, observing the Decurion people at work in open transparency provides anything but that impression. Shared beliefs may explain why Decurion holds together despite continuous forced acceptance of a staggering diversification of every kind imaginable in a business where creativity is lifeblood and would have fractured other firms.

You can look outside the organizations referenced in *An Everyone Culture* for more instances of cultures where the person is as important as the work. And you will find them. Daniel Coyle's recently released, *The Culture Code*, is a great guidebook on how to create them. In a recent LinkedIn post Adam Grant transcribes a podcast with "Daily Show" writers. With surprise and bemusement, Grant (2018) observes how informality, trust, irreverence and "burstiness" (well-timed and well-tolerated interruptions) move a high-pressure process forward. The comedy writers' banter (unchanged when host Trevor Noah steps into the room) is a dynamic authentic form of brainstorming which, unlike so much staged "group creativity," is actually productive.

Obviously, not every successful organization practices the integral deliberative development Kegan and Lahey find so distinguishing. Not every organization can. A unit that seeks to become a DDO within a larger non-DDO organization risks languishing in not so splendid isolation. There are examples of highly coherent technical teams whose specificity of expertise separates them by default. Certain public sector regulatory groups fall into this category. Essential as their expertise may be, as individuals they may be exposed to criticism for activities not easily explicable in plain language even where holding onto highly trained staff is vital to the national interest. So there are risks in building DDOs at scale. Fortunately, DDO processes are robust and deliver extraordinary results.

What is becoming painfully clear is that, if our organizations in every sector fail to realize how important lifelong development is to everyone employed by them, genuinely achievable career satisfaction, excellence in delivery and personal meaning for all will be very hard to come by. Tax dodges like pretending employees are really contractors, may save a few dollars and dilute responsibility. Unfortunately, such tactics also dissolve the relational bonds necessary to build the productivity of DDOs. Considering the complex challenges facing society at every level, it's only a matter of time before the intentional fostering of deliberately developmental organizations provides powerful and sorely needed front line support for our democratic institutions. What will it take to get us there?

#### **About the Author:**

**Donald R. Officer** is a writer, former public servant and retired teacher. He facilitates on topics of public and professional interest while writing, coaching and consulting on practical applications of social science research. He can be reached at donald.officer@gmail.com.

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