BOOK REVIEW: *THE MYTH OF LEADERSHIP* (2004) BY J. S. NIELSEN

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This provocative book is an excellent presentation of an alternative leadership perspective which is long overdue. Nielsen (2004) argues that the common elite hierarchical leadership perspective actually robs many individuals in an organization of the opportunity to contribute and share in the elements of organizational success, productivity, and more cohesive teamwork.

Jeffrey S. Nielsen's (2004) *The Myth of Leadership: Creating Leaderless Organizations* provides an excellent alternative organizational construct for dealing with the complexity and dynamic nature of the current work environment, discarding the damaging and limiting hierarchical approach to managing organizations. Among the plethora of leadership and management literature, this book offers a much-needed and novel perspective worth further serious exploration and reflection.

Context

Nielsen (2004) presents a strong case for how the common elite hierarchical perspective actually robs many individuals in an organization of the opportunity to contribute and share in the elements of organizational success, productivity, and more cohesive teamwork. He further argues that you cannot make an organization worth working in unless you are joyously engaged. Based on his experience in consulting, he concludes that genuine communication only occurs between equals, and secrecy frequently breeds corruption and abuse of power.

Nielsen (2004) cites a common recent revelation: the best decisions are made close to where the work is done, through open communication and participation of experienced and knowledgeable employees. This is because genuine communication and cooperation will occur only between peers. Unfortunately, even the most benign and open-minded leaders [managers] will in the end create dependence and compliance in their direct reports, not interdependence and commitment.

The central problem, according Nielsen, is the myth of leadership, which is an illusion and plays to our human disposition to see history as a series of dramatic events involving only a

few heroic, gifted individuals. As Nielsen explains, this perspective overlooks and devalues the impact of a vast majority of people who lack status and recognition, but who truly contribute to making things work. These rank-based assumptions rob many employees of self-worth and create irresolvable tensions for others. Therefore, the myth of leadership hinders the natural evolution and success of organizations and minimizes employee enjoyment of a meaningful life in the organization.

Author

Jeffrey S. Nielsen is a consultant who specializes in strategy, organization development, and training. His firm, Intellectual Capital Development, focuses on helping individuals think strategically and act like business owners. Nielsen began his consulting and training career with the Franklin Covey Company, traveling extensively to consult with Fortune 100 companies and agencies of the U.S. government. He has also worked with Right Management Consultants, Inc., an international outplacement and organizational consulting firm. A former Teaching Fellow at Boston College, Nielsen is currently a visiting lecturer at Brigham Young University.

Audience

This book is beneficial for researchers and practitioners in any organization struggling for insights on how to keep up with the complexity and pace of change in the current work environment or simply not satisfied with the traditional ways of making decisions and conducting strategic planning.

Content Overview

According to Nielsen, when allowed to share in business deliberations, individual employees expand their range of concerns beyond the narrow self-interest to include a disciplined concern for the well-being of the whole organization. Most rank-based organizations discourage individual participation in decision making. Deprived of a share in business deliberations, individual employees become almost totally absorbed with their own concerns and needs.

Nielsen introduces a new paradigm of organization called peer-based. He describes peer-based, as one lacking the traditional hierarchical approach to management (what he calls rank-based), where decisions are reserved for the select few (who Nielsen argues actually are not sufficiently informed) and employees are expected to simply comply and not question their seniors. His new paradigm proposes dismissing the notion of hierarchical leader or leadership and changing organizations from the traditional rank-based thinking and decision-making approach to one where all are invited to participate in decisions and planning, based on their expertise and experience.

Nielsen contrasts the typical rank-based assumptions, structure, and practices with those of the peer-based approach, and describes how the new approach would produce much better results. Peer-based thinking allows everyone to find their unique talents and make their authentic contribution to create a stronger organization.

Nielsen concludes with a discussion on how an organization can transition from rank-based to peer-based, develop a peer-based strategy, and what a "leaderless" organization may look like.

Comparison

Nielsen is not the first to propose a different model for how decisions are made. Turbulent environments have long been regarded as compelling organizations to manage uncertainty more actively (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Stacey, 2001), to exploit change as an opportunity (Drucker, 1999) and to evolve their business processes and management philosophies frequently (Stalk, 1988; Eisenhardt, 1989; Strader, Lin, & Shaw, 1998; Senge & Carstedt, 2001). However, organizations often have difficulty changing strategy and structure (adapting) quickly enough for keeping pace with the demands of uncertainty and change (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001).

McCrimmon (2006), Pearce and Conger (2003), and Raelin (2003) wrote that complexity demands leadership from more than just the executives, and, in some situations, everyone. Leadership is another important element of agility and adaption in an organization. Although many organizations assume the leadership needs to come from the top, the research of Collins and Porras (1994) found no evidence to support the hypothesis that great leadership is the distinguishing variable for agile and adaptive (innovative) organizations. This means a different kind of employee is needed for agility and adaption, not a strictly compliant one.

Raelin (2003) described an alternative organizational approach to leadership where the classic approach for dealing with complex conceptual situations is shifted from only the highest levels to involvement of individuals at lower levels. This encourages all members to share in the process of deciding what and when changes are required and how to implement them. His model requires all members of the organization to exhibit flexibility and adaptability in dynamic environments, and offered recommendations for how individuals could be mentored to develop these characteristics. Raelin encouraged promotion of shared leadership, team work, and collaboration on decisions, beginning with less complexity and graduating to the more complex situations as the team develops more capability and confidence. However, where Raelin never quite moved away from the paternalistic nature of management, Nielsen makes it clear this is a fundamental requirement.

Appraisal of Ideas

Peer-based thinking shows great promise for creating an environment where the ideas and expertise of all employees are valued and more likely to be considered in the decision making processes that are necessary for effectively dealing with the current environment. There are examples of very successful organizations, such as W. L. Gore, living and operating as peer-based organizations. These provide validity to the concept but also require further study to understand the degree to which the peer-based principles are related to success.

It is important to point out that Nielsen's characterization of leader and leadership is about decision making, which McCrimmon (2006) and Rost (1991) make clear is actually management, not leadership. According to Rost (1991), many authors have distinguished between leadership and management (Graham, 1988; Jacobs, 1970; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Selznick, 1957; Zaleznik, 1977). Rost cited Selznick (1957) as the first who wrote that "leadership is not equivalent to office-holding or high prestige or authority or decision-making" (p. 130). He defined *management* as a relationship based on authority, and *leadership* as a relationship based on influence. McCrimmon (2006) argues that leadership is simply any

influence process based on a change idea, and management is about making decisions or facilitating the change idea. Nielsen does fall victim to the common error of viewing leadership as a decision making role. That said, while Nielsen is not clear on the distinction, his recommendations are consistent with the notions of employees taking more responsibility for leadership and management in the organization.

Conclusion

This book is a must-read for anyone who is looking for a completely different perspective on how to effectively deal with the complex and dynamic work environment for which the traditional hierarchical management approach is insufficient. Nielsen's concept offers fertile territory for research into what makes organizations extraordinary.

About the Author

Charles Sanders holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Regent University. He is an organizational development consultant with Alion Science and Technology Corporation, as well as adjunct professor in business management for Spring Arbor University. With more than 30 years of experience in management and leadership, policy development, strategic planning, and training and learning, including corporate staff support at all levels, he has provided advice to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Navy Staff, Joint Forces Command, and other executive-level government and industry officials in matters of organizational development, training and learning policy, and plans, methods, and technologies. Email: cgsanders57@gmail.com

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