Book Review

BOOK TITLE: [Re]Create The Organization You Really Want! Leadership And Organization Design For Sustainable Excellence (2016)

Author: John Latham

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Reviewed by Amber Webber, PhD

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Executive leaders and organization design consultants often work at the center of major organization design challenges: satisfying the needs of several stakeholder groups, navigating intensifying competition, adapting to continuous technology changes, and mastering a myriad of organizational dynamics. Though these modern management hurdles may seem daunting, John Latham, PhD, says that creating sustainable excellence in the form of value for all key organizational stakeholders is a core leadership responsibility. With [Re]Create the Organization You Really Want, Latham (2016) explores the task of taking a systems approach to organizational design to create “ever-improving value for multiple stakeholders including the workforce, customers, investors, suppliers and partners, society, and the natural environment” (p. 11).

Adopting the mindset of an organizational architect, Latham (2016) draws on intersecting research from a number of disciplines to discuss a new approach to strategic leadership: producing value across a comprehensive scorecard by sustainably transforming organizational systems. The author provides a “Leadership and Design Blueprint” (p. 21) and a series of essential questions for executive leaders to apply in structuring organizational transformation to performance excellence. The book is formatted as a fourteen-element guide for designing and navigating the journey to sustainable excellence.

Latham (2016) sorts the fourteen elements into five major areas including the forces and facilitators of change, a culture of service, the individual leader, a collaborative leadership style, and at the center of the blueprint, the organization’s leadership system. The leadership system encompasses the interlinked activities and tasks for aligning the organization toward performance excellence: understanding stakeholder needs; forming a compelling directive; developing a focused strategy; enabling, empowering, and engaging the workforce; [re]designing organizational systems and processes; measuring success according to a comprehensive scorecard; employing continuous performance review; aligning, coaching, and appreciating behaviors; and finally, facilitating continuous learning and improvement processes.

Each of the fourteen components is explored in depth over the course of the book. Latham (2016) offers key practical insights and crucial linkages among the design elements. Additionally, the author provides supporting information that includes initiative planning templates, reflective questions for consideration, and leadership system examples. The author delves into great detail situating each aspect of the key elements in the blueprint, explaining why each is important and what results may be expected if the component is not effectively addressed in the effort to create sustainable excellence.
The concept of [Re]Create was borne from Latham’s (2016) personal experience as an executive and from his academic research. Much of the data supporting the theoretical frameworks and conceptual maps at the core of the work came from a study Latham (2013a & 2013b) conducted with fourteen CEOs who each led their organizations through performance excellence transformations that culminated in Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards.

[Re]Create the Organization You Really Want presents a sturdy bridge between management theory and practical application, highlighting evidence-based management as a crucial aspect of organization [re]design. The text itself is targeted primarily for executive managers and organization architects; Latham (2016) bounds the work presented in the book explaining, “there is no heavy-handed management theory required for this process” (p. 161). While the text is effectively supported by scholarly research and key citations to other essential works, the text is presented as a walk through the Leadership and Design Blueprint with an application focus.

Working from a cross-disciplinary field of research, Latham’s (2016) book extends the current scholarly dialogue regarding organizational learning, leadership, and strategy. With its focus on designing and institutionalizing systems within the organization, Latham’s (2016) work draws together the discussion from change management and transformation (e.g., Cameron & McNaughtan, 2014; Malhotra & Hinings, 2015), to practical applications of organizational learning theory (Chadwick & Raver, 2015; Lengnick-Hall & Inocencio-Gray, 2013), and to strategic management (Leonardi, 2015).

Latham’s (2016) work also offers an interesting supplement to current research on strategy-as-practice. The work addresses the practical considerations and contextual sensitivities Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl, and Whittington (2016) called for in their analysis of current work employing a practice-based view of strategy. By advocating for an evidence-based approach to management and the systems perspective, Latham avoids the isolated focus on best practices Jarzabkowski et al. (2016) criticized. Latham also explores the “network of relationships” Seidl and Whittington (2014) referenced in their call for strategy-as-practice research employing “flatter” ontologies than are traditionally applied in the discipline (p. 1408). Though the research supporting the book’s frameworks and assertions does not follow the ethnographic approach typical to strategy-as-practice research, Latham’s (2016) approach does capture an extensive look into practices and pitfalls of strategy and organization [re]design.

[Re]Create the Organization You Really Want provides an accessible reference applicable to most strategic leaders embarking on organizational design journeys. It is important to note however that readers looking for an easily summarized or heavily generalized resource will be disappointed. The book does not contain prescriptive instructions for leaders; the work instead offers important questions and key points for consideration for a reflective and iterative approach to strategic leadership and the complexities of organizational transformation. In a similar vein, the book is also bounded to the degree that extensive discussions linking the author’s assertions with management theory and other current research are left in the author’s previously published journal articles. Scholars seeking a more in-depth explanations of the links between the Leadership and Design Blueprint and the larger dialogue of theoretical work should reference Latham’s (2012, 2013a, & 2013b) publications, each of which serves to more explicitly ground his frameworks to management theory.

As presented, however, [Re]Create the Organization You Really Want stands as an essential desk guide for any executive, change agent, or consultant looking for more reflective ways to approach the task of sustainably, improving performance across a comprehensive scorecard via organization design. The work is sound, evidence-based, and well-referenced. Though the framework and its supporting elements are presented in a sequential manner, the work may be referenced as needed for insights on
each stage of the organization [re]design process and applied to facilitate important reflection and discussion in leading the transformation to performance excellence.

References
Contributing Authors

Dr. Don Larsen is currently teaching at College of Business, Montana State University, Billings, USA. He holds Ph.d in Business from University of Missouri. Dr. Don Larsen brings experiential learning to his courses in management, leadership, and human resource management. He brings knowledge to the classroom from his experience as a senior auditor for the U.S. Department of Defense and as a consultant. He has published in journals such as SAM Advanced Management Journal and Journal of Business and Psychology.

Dr. Sandra D. Edwards is a professor in the Department of Business Administration, College of Business and Technology, Northeastern State University, Broken Arrow, OK, USA.

Dr. Heather Weller, Ph.D., is an Affiliate Professor at North Park University in Chicago, Illinois. Dr. Weller started up a Marketing Strategy Agency in 2017; E-knowledge Bookshelf, LLC. Research interests include brand equity, strategic partnerships, and marketing education.

Dr. Alyssa Streller, Ph.D., is a Senior Manager of Credit and Fraud Analytics at Verizon. Additionally, she has served as an academic editor and curriculum designer for multiple projects. Research interests include leadership theories, marketing effectiveness, and organizational behavior as well as change management.

Dr. Elizabeth Purinton, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor and Department Chair at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, U.S.A. Dr. Purinton is a fellow of the AMA-Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium. Her research programs include consumer behavior of jewelry and tattoos, student engagement and strategic alignment. Dr. Purinton’s research is published in the Academy of Marketing Science Review, Journal of Electronic Commerce in Organizations, the Journal of Business Research, the Journal of Business and Behavioral Sciences, the Journal of Business to Business Marketing, and several conference proceedings.

Dr. Michael Williams, Ph.D., MBA is the Dean of the School of Business and Management at Thomas Edison State University in Trenton, NJ. As the school’s chief academic and administrative officer, he leads all aspects of the school's scholar-practitioner focused degree programming. Dr. Williams is an ACBSP evaluator, a member of the Dean's Panel for the 2018 ACBSP Dean's Symposium and the 2018 Region 1 Best Presentation Winner. He is the founder and principal consultant for Psychological Practice Services, an international consultancy specializing in business development for mental health professionals. Dr. Williams's research, publishing and presentation interests include; the psycho-dynamics of leadership, influence of modern psychoanalytic theory on leadership efficacy, workplace bullying, cultural change management. Dr. Williams earned a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership, Policy, and Administration and an MS in Human Resource Management from Fordham University. In addition, he earned an MS in Labor and Employee Relations from Rutgers University, an MBA in Management from DeVry University and an MS in Mental Health Counseling from Touro College and University System.

Dr. Tami Moser, Ph.D., DBH is a Chair of the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences and Associate Professor of Pharmacy Administration at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford Oklahoma. She is also the creator and coordinator of the Center of Excellence in Pharmacy Leadership, Innovation, and Quality Outcomes for the College of Pharmacy. In addition, she has served as a consultant in Higher Education and in the healthcare industry. Dr. Moser holds multiple graduate degrees including: Ph.D. in Organization and Management with a specialization in Human Resource Management from Capella University, a Doctorate in Behavioral Health (DBH) with a specialization in the development and
management of integrated health care teams focused on quality outcomes from Arizona State University College of Health Solutions, and Master in Public Administration with a specialization in Management from the University of Oklahoma.

Dr Muhammad Sohail Ahmed is an associate professor at Eastern Michigan University. He received B.E degree from N.E.D University Pakistan and MS (Mechanical Engineering), MS (Manufacturing Engineering) and Ph.D degrees from Wayne State University Detroit USA. From 1990-1993 Muhammad worked for Ford Motor Company as a CAE application engineer working on Electric vehicle and on FEA frontal crash design. From 1994 to 1999 Muhammad worked as a Research Associate/ Scientist at Wayne State University’s Department of Industrial Engineering, on four National Institute of Standards & Technology’s automotive research grants, worth 8 mil dollars, in the area of dimensional control, reliability, problem solving, decision making and auto body digital virtual build. From 1999-2008 Muhammad was the manager for Wayne State University BS Manufacturing Engineering program at Focus HOPE, a civil rights organization in Detroit. Dr Ahmed’s research work is in the area of decision support system, knowledge management, learning organization, lean and quality systems, project management and engineering education. Muhammad also worked on the National Science Foundation’s Manufacturing Education grant to Greenfield Coalition as a researcher and subject matter expert. He worked on the development of web based manufacturing engineering curriculum and course.