

Strategic Organizational Learning – Using System Dynamics for Innovation and Sustained Performance

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Gephart and Marsick's book *Strategic Organizational Learning – Using System Dynamics for Innovation and Sustained Performance* addresses organizational learning with a rather distinctive perspective: the authors have their very own point of view which they have been working on and testing out in the field for almost two decades. This book is a product of that endeavour.

Gephart and Marsick begin by providing an overview of the topic and book structure, making the relevance of the subject extremely clear to the reader. The theoretical model “Strategic Leverage Through Learning” is presented in a comprehensive manner that is accessible to both the expert and the newcomer to the field, and the language is clear and different visual schemata are offered, although the authors care to elaborate and provide sources for further reading to the more eager readers of this book. The chapters are composed of what authors call “in-depth cases of system learning and change” (p. 2) that include both the use of the model to “assess and guide change” and to “analyse and compare transformational change” (p. 16). The book analyses a total of six different cases, including a corporation that changed its business strategy (Chapter 3), an amusement park that faced critical incidents (Chapter 4), a high school that changed dramatically its approach through leadership (Chapter 5), a multinational corporation's (Ericsson) use of an educational programme to implement a new business strategy (Chapter 6), schools participating in an autism model programme (Chapter 7) and the design of a nationwide programme with a social aim (Chapter 8).

The book concludes with an engaging discussion of the applicability of the “Strategic Leverage Through Learning” model that encourages users' critical thinking and to reflect on the practice.

In a society that is evermore knowledge-based and service-oriented, strategic organizational learning could not be a more relevant topic. Moreover, in highly volatile environments, organizational learning is arguably the only source of sustainable competitive advantage for organizations (Liao and Wu, 2010). Three main things come to mind about this refreshing book: its interesting hands-on approach, its broad-scope use of the concept of “organizations” in the in-depth cases (that do not merely reflect the corporate reality) and its user-friendliness, to invite



people from different backgrounds in managerial roles but not necessarily trained in management or organizational theory to think and intervene with some knowledge and confidence in this area.

The book's authors begin by providing some useful and appealing insights into the importance of organizational learning and the crucial significance of the commitment of the entire organization in that mission; previous research had already confirmed that a consistent involvement of management is crucial for the attainment of results (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000), and Wang and Ahmed (2003, p. 9) had already stated that although organizational learning is based on individual learning, "the concept of organizational learning has quickly evolved to cover various aspects of organizational management". However, the fact is that still sometimes authors tend to lose focus of a more systemic approach and the need to involve the entire organization to get actual change in the culture, embracing their own variable as some sort of "holy grail", a mistake that can happen in theory as well as in practice (Nelson, 2003).

Gephart and Marsick are keen on providing in-depth cases where they guide us in a step-by-step fashion on a journey of how they addressed issues that diverse organizations faced. The authors share, in nuanced detail, their intervention process that gives access to the reader about practical details that are often only acquired or tend to emerge only while trying to solve an organizational issue or implementing a practice or policy. Books on organizational theory often provide comprehensive theory and intricate conceptual articulation but no application of constructs; the examples provided in this work help guide the readers through the meanders of the implementation strategies which can be useful especially for novice learners and practitioners.

Furthermore, what is refreshing is what the authors understand by "organizational". This goes beyond the traditional textbook corporate world and makes the book more appealing to other professionals as well. Not all organizations have financial performance as their only – or even primary – objective, which means that aside from other contextual characteristics, organizations can assume many configurations. Traditionally, textbooks tend to consider mostly corporations in their organizational case studies, and this creates a gap for students in specific areas of management and practitioners who are dealing with non-corporate issues which can also be socially important and move about a considerable amount of resources.

As service organizations flourish, another consequence is that many people in managerial roles do not necessarily have training in this area, which means that nurses, teachers, hair stylists, etc., may be confronted, as their career unfolds and their organizations thrive, with the need for intervening at a managerial level. Additionally, even workers without managerial roles can be highly participative [regardless of the fact that that might be an underappreciated attitude, (Belle, 2016)] or be part of organizational change processes and therefore in need of or interested in this kind of body of knowledge. The accessibility of the book invites individuals from different areas to reflect on strategic organizational learning and provides tools for them to implement the authors' strategy in different contexts.

The book may be of importance for students who are learning about organizational intervention and are in dire need of practical cases that are well-documented and well-supported by literature and sustained by great thinking processes, for practitioners who often find themselves put-off by books that should cater to their needs but end up being too dense and too inclined towards an "ivory tower" to actually be useful for them.

Finally, the book, perhaps, is of importance for the more theoretical researchers, in the sense that it can provide an edited view of the field, which is arguably lacking at times in such professionals.

Gephart and Marsicks' book is pragmatic because of its brevity. This can be seen by the presentation of a single point of view, which is the book's major limitation and, for the reasons previously expressed, also its greatest strength. In conclusion, the book provides insights that are conceptual and pragmatic in the area of organizational learning and organizational functioning and is an engaging resource for all researchers and practitioners in the organizational field. I believe it may indeed prove to be a functional text for practice and an excellent starting point for conceptual development.

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