

Books

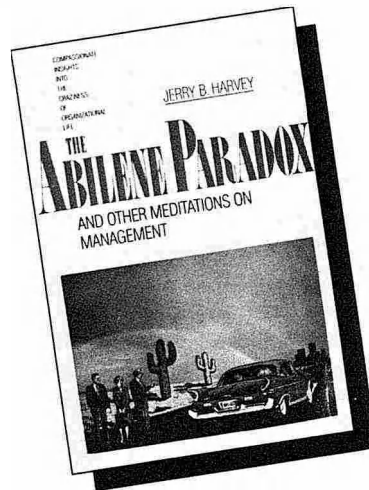
Fly-Flicking Phrogs in the Organizational Pond

The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management, by Jerry B. Harvey.

Have you ever wondered if God is a mouse? Well, how do you know it isn't true? In *The Abilene Paradox*, Jerry Harvey surmises that if we cannot be certain of something, we must be willing to acknowledge the possibility of the seemingly absurd. Upon reflection, he then begins to wonder, "What if traditional management theory is also a mouse, and nothing is really as it seems?"

Based on that thought, Harvey launches into a series of insightful and humorous homilies on the absurdities of organizational life. Harvey is a self-acclaimed sermonizer with a proclivity toward storytelling, but he is not given to solemn moralizing. He intentionally strays from mainstream bottom-line and worker-satisfaction obsessions, drawing instead on children's fables, mythological characters, and Biblical parables to deliver his management messages. An annotated bibliography lists such diverse readings as "The Princess and the Frog," *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*, and *The Living Bible*.

In this highly atypical management book, Harvey addresses such management topics as leadership, followership, group dynamics, communication, motivation, morale, productivity, consensus, and cause and effect. He diagnoses the paradoxes of organizational dynamics and offers ways of coping with them. Harvey coined the phrase "Abilene Paradox" based on a childhood trip his family took to the Texas town, despite the fact that no one really wanted to go. In a 1974 article, he first used the phrase in reference to organizational life, meaning to go along with the crowd, lemming-like, pouring time and money into a project that every-



one suspects will not work but refuses to speak up against.

The Abilene Paradox discusses how organizations continually set themselves up for failure by fostering alienation, distrust, deceit, and a fear of risk-taking among their members. He shows how organizations perpetuate negative fantasies, taking action that contradicts the data they have for dealing with problems. As a result, they compound those problems.

Organizations, says Harvey, have not learned how to take responsibility for honest decision making and problem solving. "Though we have learned of the reality of separation, we have not had the opportunity to learn the reciprocal skills of connection, with the result that, like the ancient dinosaurs, we are breeding organizations with self-destructive decision-making proclivities."

As one of many examples, he looks at the Watergate scandal, in which Nixon's henchmen instigated, and then tried to cover up, actions that were dubious from the start, if not plain stupid. "When the illegality of the act surfaced, it was nearly inevitable that blaming, self-protective actions, and scapegoating would result in the emotional separation from both the president and one another that the principals feared. Thus, by reversing real and fantasied

risk, they effectively ensured the outcome they least desired."

A true Abilener, Harvey contends, knows the difference between real and phony conflict, and between appropriate behavior and contrived, but chooses to allow the coercive influence of the group to affect individual behavior. That Orwellian syndrome, dubbed "groupthink," in which individuals ignore their ability to manage what they all agree on internally, "has been damned as the cause for everything from the lack of creativity in organizations (A camel is a horse designed by a committee) to anti-social behavior in juveniles (My Johnny is a good boy; he was just pressured into shoplifting by the kids he runs around with.)"

Using other case studies, he continues to show the alienating tendencies of organizations, where managers follow orders without questioning authority and work, not so much to get ahead, but to maintain the status quo.

One chapter, "Organizations as Phrog Farms," an interesting play on a children's fable, draws analogies about organizational "phrogs," who "spend more time flicking flies in the fog than draining the swamp. It seems that their behavior is circular. If they were to spend time draining the swamp, there would be no flies to flick—and no phrogs. For that reason, it's very important to phrogs to maintain the swamp as it is rather than to drain it." Happily, the reader is provided alternatives for phrogs living in the organizational swamp.

Harvey's aim throughout the eight chapters—to stimulate thought and conversation—would make *The Abilene Paradox* a provoking discussion piece at an organizational workshop or retreat.

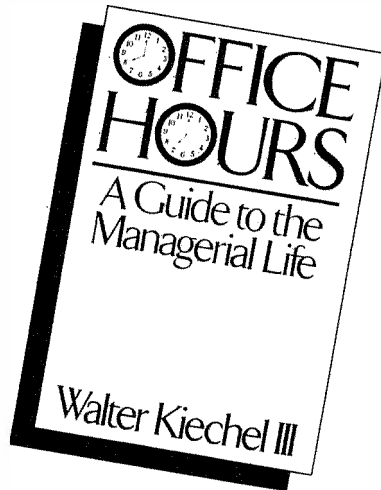
Readers should be prepared to chuckle, and perhaps wince, as Harvey blends conventional OD wisdom, a knack for exposing organizational oxymorons, and a quirky tongue-in-cheek humor (take,

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for example, the title of chapter 4, "Management and the Myth of Abraham; or, Go Plant a Cabbage on God's Behalf"). Consider it a personal challenge to pick up this book.

Harvey is a professor of management science at George Washington University in Washington, DC. He has recounted his tales to managers from businesses, churches, academic institutions, and governmental organizations.

The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management. 150 pp. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 617/862-6650, \$19.95. Circle No. 180 on Reader Service Card.



gotta change the rules' when the group is on the verge of a decision."

How about meeting savvy? Kiechel says, "Get there a few minutes before the appointed hour, and as others file in, start acting like what social scientists term a participant-observer. This stance, much favored by anthropologists, entails joining the natives in their ritual dance around the fire while making detailed mental notes on all that goes on. Pay attention not only to what is said, but also to so-called nonverbal behavior."

Kiechel (who edits the "Managing" section of *Fortune* magazine), combines traditional reporting skills with a magazine-style focus, tone, and brevity. A large part of the book is based on material gathered from personal interviews with senior corporate managers, in which he asked them to describe the realities of corporate life.

One managing director at Shearson Lehman Brothers tells how to differentiate "high-energy, high-contentment executives from their less ebullient brethren." Happy execs, he says, are able to "take a playful attitude toward their work and themselves. They can keep at bay those carping, censorious adult voices built into each of us, the ones that whisper, 'You can't do that' or 'It will never fly.'" In conversation,

happy execs most often talk about their interactions with other people—their customers, colleagues, and family. They are motivated, not by money, but by the recognition and respect of people who see them in action.

Making liberal use of quotes, references, and his own perceptiveness about human nature, Kiechel shares other insights on such topics as managing your boss, coping with the managerial midlife crisis, lifelong retirement planning, getting beyond sexist management, relating to nepotism, avoiding on-the-job boredom (job rotation, job redesign, attitude redesign), and more.

The writing is clear, conversational, and based on practical experience. It's the kind of book you'll find yourself nodding in agreement with, smiling, perhaps, as you substitute your own experiences for those described. In the end, you'll probably find you do know a thing or two about office politics and, in fact, play the game quite shrewdly.

Office Hours: A Guide to the Managerial Life. 302 pp. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 617/227-0730, \$18.95. Circle No. 181 on Reader Service Card.

Reshaping Corporate America

Successful Training Strategies: Twenty-Six Innovative Corporate Models, by Jill Casner-Lotto and associates.

"Education is a necessity for growth and a key to productivity, quality, and profitability. It's a given in our business. The question here is never *if* we should train—it's *how* do we train?" Such comments from corporate and management execs are related in *Successful Training Strategies* by Jill Casner-Lotto and her associates.

The book provides detailed case

Kudos to Conversations at the Water Cooler

Office Hours: A Guide to the Managerial Life, by Walter Kiechel, III.

So, you're not into office politics? Well, perhaps you shouldn't be oblivious to such machinations. Office politics aren't necessarily nasty, sneaky, or backbiting, says Walter Kiechel. Many successful managers who politick full force are humane, decent, wise, and even funny.

Office Hours is a self-help book designed to show you how to work with others in your organization and how to get the most from subordinates, superiors, and yourself. It is a guide to corporate politics for those who think they don't want to play the game, but who, deep-down, really want to know the unspoken rules of getting ahead.

For instance, did you know that effective participants in a meeting jump back and forth between four stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing? "You should gauge your contribution accordingly, helping the group form when it is forming, not storming when the rest of the crew is trying to perform. In other words, don't yell, 'Stop—we

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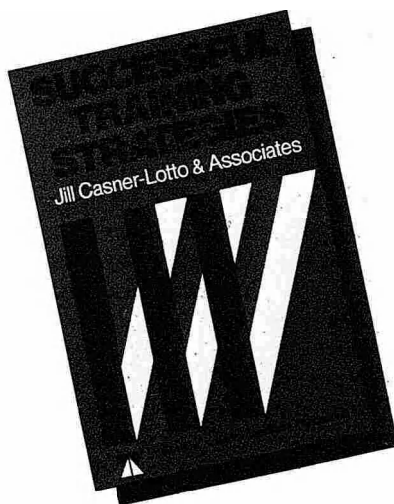
studies of how top companies have reshaped their training strategies in response to worldwide competition and rapidly changing technology. Each case study, written by an individual author, gives a personalized view of the company's background, its current training program, its long-range training strategy, and any unique or noteworthy features or philosophy of the training structure.

Successful Training Strategies is based on an intensive, three-year study conducted by the Work in America Institute and a 23-member team of industry experts. (A companion piece is *Training—The Competitive Edge: Introducing New Technology into the Workplace*, listed in this column as suggested additional reading).

In *Successful Training Strategies*, the study identifies five major forces affecting manufacturing companies, with the following implications for training:

- increased global and domestic competition;
- rapid changes in technology;
- widespread mergers, acquisitions, and divestitures;
- a better-educated workforce;
- occupational obsolescence and emerging new occupations.

Casner-Lotto and her associates met on-site with company and union representatives and gathered insights on self-instruction, role modeling, on-the-job training, coaching, rotational assignments, and more. The resulting case studies give a firsthand look at how particular companies successfully designed and implemented training innovations to deal with difficult problems. Readers will find out how Travelers Corporation increased computer literacy among employees; how New England Telephone keeps track of training quality and costs; how Xerox is improving operations and employee opportunity through technical training; and how General Foods is involving line managers, hourly employees, and technical



personnel in the training process.

A senior OD consultant for General Foods notes, "We're in a difficult transition period. We now have fewer staff members at GF identified as professional trainers, so it means more people are wearing many different hats. No one is going to tell managers they have to train their employees—it's up to them to make sure this happens."

In five parts, the book highlights

- how aligning training strategy with corporate goals can increase the effectiveness of training;
- how leading-edge companies are implementing "continuous learning" and "employee involvement" practices;

- several companies that have developed successful manufacturer/user training partnerships;
- innovative and cost-effective ways to design and deliver training;
- how to combine continuous learning and employment security to enhance the quality of learning.

One successful training strategy is an innovative electronics retraining program at Pacific Bell in California that is directed at employees in non-technical jobs, many of them women. The program "opens up opportunities in ten different jobs ranging from communications technician to splicer. For many employees, successful completion of the

course and relocation to one of these technical positions can represent a significant move up the career ladder, in terms of both skills and pay." At the time of publication, 750 employees had benefited from the program.

Throughout the book, checklists, graphs, and tables help to illustrate training costs, evaluation exercises, and employee-involvement philosophies. Readers will get an inside view of how companies are applying new technology to increase user competence and to yield improved quality, lower costs, faster return on investment, higher productivity, and long-term organizational growth, if not survival.

Due to the nature of the study, chapter authors have written concise, although sometimes insulated accounts of each company. Because the text analysis in each chapter is based on a particular case, the writing gets a little dry at times, and there is some redundancy in the explanations of policies and philosophies. Some readers may choose to read only about those companies of specific interest. However, good preliminary research and the editors' clear understanding of the issues yields a well-organized and meaningful book that will be of interest to many trainers and corporate consultants.

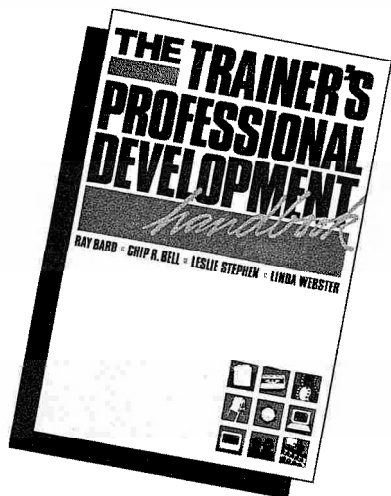
Jill Casner-Lotto is research editor for policy studies at the Work in America Institute.

Successful Training Strategies: Twenty-Six Innovative Corporate Models. 429 pp. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 415/433-1767, \$32.95. **Circle No. 182 on Reader Service Card.**

An HRD Whole-Earth Catalog

The Trainer's Professional Development Handbook, by Ray Bard, Chip R. Bell, Leslie Stephen, and Linda Webster.

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For a person just entering the HRD field, knowing where to turn for resources can be baffling. Where do you begin? Who do you ask for help? How can you go about helping yourself? This handbook, put together by a team of consultants and trainers, is a practical, three-in-one guide for easing the transition. For more experienced trainers, it will serve as a useful professional reference.

Part One gives an overview of the HRD field (past, present, and future), discusses career options and growth opportunities, and gives step-by-step guidelines for maximizing learning potential and developing professionally. Part Two is an extensive catalog of resources for HRD people—complete with costs, ordering information, and addresses of suppliers, as well as an up-to-date list of selected books, journals, associations, learning exercises, and aids. In Part Three, a concise encyclopedia of HRD concepts, terms, and trends offers a quick way to become familiar with the field.

The book highlights basic adult learning principles—learning how to learn, charting a learning style, overcoming personal blocks to learning, helping others learn. Included are helpful hints on how to acquire new content, how to integrate new technology, and how to gain greater

competence in a particular area.

The Trainer's Professional Development Handbook is written from the premise that "professional development is a process of becoming," and that "trainers—even the most experienced and best trained—must keep learning or become obsolete" (Malcolm Knowles, 1983). The authors also draw on the works and wisdom of other HRD greats.

This book is a well-researched, well-balanced resource that will be a

worthwhile addition to any HRD professional's reference library.

The Trainer's Professional Development Handbook. 326 pp. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 415/433-1767, \$34.95.

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Additional Reading

Charismatic Leadership: The Elusive Factor in Organizational Effectiveness, by Jay A. Conger, Rabindra N. Kanungo and Associates. 352 pp. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 415/433-1767, \$28.95.

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Human Resource Management: Evolving Roles & Responsibilities, edited by Lee Dyer. 270 pp. Edison, NJ: BNA Books, 201/225-1900, \$25.

Circle No. 185 on Reader Service Card.

The IBM Lesson: The Profitable Art of Full Employment, by D. Quinn Mills. 216 pp. New York, NY: Times Books, 212/751-2600, \$17.95.

Circle No. 186 on Reader Service Card.

Training—The Competitive Edge: Introducing New Technology into the Workplace, by Jerome M. Rosow and Robert Zager. 243 pp. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 415/433-1767, \$24.95.

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