

## **BOOK REVIEW**

M. M. Beyerlein, G. Klein, & L. Broedling (Eds.)  
*The Collaborative Work Systems Fieldbook: Strategies for Building Successful Teams*  
San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons

Reviewed by: Amanda J. Hunt

Austin once wrote that when considering a text one should ask the following three questions: 1) What does the text say? 2) What does the text intend to say? 3) What should the text say? At issue in the first is one's ability to do a cold reading; it is a question of practice and ability. The third is a question of perspective and at times of hubris; the battlefield of epistemological privilege and academic ego. The second is the complicated question; the question that often yields the greatest confusions and the question that is most pertinent to any critical book review.

The Collaborative Work Systems Fieldbook is an impressive collection of 34 articles from a broad range of scholars and practitioners. The primary premise is that teamwork and collaboration are not ends in themselves, but a means to an end. The variety of voices and theoretical foundations make for an excellent toolbox. However, its promise is also its affliction.

The editors have employed a series of devices to create an order to the volume. They have divided it into 6 discrete subsections; Strategy and Goal Setting, Leadership and Organizational Culture, Structure and Overall Design, Work Processes and Communication Systems, Human Resource Processes, and Individual, Interpersonal, and Team Competencies and Skills. The titles of the subsections and the decisions to include articles under particular subsections at times seems vaguely arbitrary and reflective of current fads. The reader would be well advised to become acquainted with the table of contents rather than rely entirely on the editor's choices.

In another attempt to help the reader navigate the book, Beyerlein and Harris have included a chapter entitled, "Critical Success Factors in Team-Based Organizing." Based on research and experience they identify and describe 10 critical factors. A graphic template is included. Each chapter is measured against these factors. It often enables the reader to move skillfully through the volume.

However there are missteps. For example, it seems peculiar that none of the authors have adequately responded to the second factor, "work must be conducive to teams." Further, a careful reader will discover that some chapters incorporate and at times exhaustively address certain critical factors and yet the graphic would seem to suggest otherwise. Were the reader to entirely trust the editor's perceptions she might skip over highly relevant pieces.

This reviewer finds it most remarkable in the case of the articles by Bradshaw, Roberts, and Cheuey, and that of De Guerre. Their articles, each excellent, are often omitted from the graphic in areas they most certainly address. Grounded in Open Systems Theory, each chapter necessarily responds to many of the critical factors. And yet, unpredictably, they are frequently excluded.

Nevertheless, the editors have done an invaluable service to the reader. Organizing such a collection of different techniques and strategies is a Herculean task and this reviewer cannot imagine anyone who could have done much better.

It is as if the diversity of authors, theories, and practices preclude the possibility of creating a single framework against which they can each be compared. In fact, perhaps the editor's struggle best reflects a historical reality of the field: it is developing so quickly and with such enthusiasm that it simply cannot be contained at this stage in its development.

This raises an interesting point; the volume is so rich in diversity that it would be almost impossible for the editors to be intimately acquainted with the theory and practice of each chapter. The editors' burden is a by-product of the volume's relevance and should not belie the superiority of the book.

The Collaborative Work Systems Fieldbook is an essential addition to the library of both scholars and practitioners in the field.

**About the author:**

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