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Book Review
*Mary Parker Follett—
Prophet of Management:
A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s*

by

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Mary Parker Follett—Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s

If a nonprofessional knew one name from the past in business management theory, that name would most likely be Frederick Taylor. As a cellist who agreed to review a book about organization management, I would even venture to assert that, in one sense, Frederick Winslow Taylor is to organization management what Pablo Casals is to the cello—a pioneering individual who personifies his field, long after his time. Philadelphian Taylor (1856-1915) founded the “scientific management” movement, which blossomed during the era in which America was being transformed from a society of craft production into one of mass production—a modern industrial society. Taylorism, which applied a mechanistic view of man as an extension of machine (mockingly portrayed in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*), improved standards of efficiency in manufacturing. In fact, so-called neo-Taylorism, with its “view of people as bionic machines,” and its “reliance on fear, internal competition, and manipulation and control,” still thrives in many modern organizations (not limited to manufacturing concerns).¹

Coming from a completely opposite direction, but equally pioneering in content and broader in vision, is the management philosophy of Mary Parker Follett. *Mary Parker Follett—Prophet of Management: A Celebration of Writings from the 1920s* contains selections of her writings, and commentaries by an international group of some of today’s most distinguished management authorities. Follett (1868-1933), born in Quincy, Massachusetts, and educated at the Thayer Academy and Radcliffe College, was influential in the early 20th century as a writer and consultant, but soon after was nearly forgotten in her native land. According to commentator Peter F. Drucker, “she had become a ‘non-person.’” His explanation of her fate is not “the expedient and politically correct one” that she was a woman, but rather that her ideas were unacceptable in the America of the 1930s and 1940s. She was “ahead of her time in the 1920s, still ahead of our time today: in Drucker’s compelling phrase, ‘the prophet of management.’” She was, however, always popular in Great Britain, and commentator Sir Peter Parker, of the London School of Economics, confesses that Follett “has mattered more to me than any other of the founders of modern management this century.” And the Japanese established a Follett Association in the 1950s to study her in depth.

The Follett philosophy is regarded variously by the commentators in this volume as humanistic, romantic, startlingly avant-garde, and utopian. (Since the 1940s, it is said, she has even been considered subversive in some quarters because of her emphasis on the primacy of collective activity in society.)

Human nature in action in business was her focus. With a background in political science and a lifelong guiding belief in democracy, Follett directed her interest toward the fulfillment of the individual in a well-ordered and just society, through democratic governance and through the optimal development of the groups in which most members of modern society must function.

As a consequence, her thought led her to promote organizations based on group networks rather than on hierarchical structures, with a strong emphasis on the influence of human relations within the group. Her analyses did not yield a step-by-step method of management, rather they were her reflections on how best to organize group efforts by recognizing the abiding truths of how human beings interact with each other. These truths have remained constant beneath the surface flow of various management fads of the intervening decades. The selections in this volume, in fact, seem more like astute essays on group psychology or sociology than writings on business administration.

Values, Premises, and Experiences

Follett's writings consist not of clear-cut sets of instructions, but of highly elaborate and interwoven general observations, conclusions, and examples based on values, premises, and experiences. (Her first triumph was the organization and management of vocational guidance centers in the Boston public schools in the early 1900s.) These values and premises include:

- ◆ a belief that democratic procedures are the best means to achieve individual fulfillment within groups, because only through them would all participants feel both involved and responsible;
- ◆ a belief that all members of organizations, managers and managees, act from a mixture of reason, feeling, and character (managers are not superior “thinkers” and managees inferior “feelers”);
- ◆ a belief that relationships and events must be seen in terms of what she called the “circular response,” that the objective “fact worshippers” do not have the whole answer in understanding the world. She says “that in the ‘behavior-process’ subject and object are both equally important and that reality is the endless relating of these, [reality] is in the endless evolving of these relatings”; and
- ◆ a belief that cooperation and “cooperative competition” yield better results than cut-throat competition.

And what of her conclusions and guiding wisdom about organizational structures and procedures? One notable doctrine is the principle of integration: her renowned essay “Constructive Conflict” proposes that since conflict—the

“appearance of difference”—is neither good nor bad, but is inevitable, it can be used to strive for integrative solutions “in which both desires have found a place, [in which] neither side has had to sacrifice anything.” Follett argued that integrative solutions are the only lasting and truly harmonious solutions, and that the use of either domination (“the easiest way of dealing with conflict”) or compromise (“the accepted, the approved way of ending controversy”) in bargaining tends to engender future difficulties. She observed that compromise is conflict forced underground, since neither party is truly satisfied and may hope to regain later what has been given up.

Her writings make clear, however, that in the meantime collective bargaining is a necessity, because “without it wages and working conditions would fall below even minimum standards. And of course if we do have bargaining we should give the two sides equal advantage as far as possible.” She emphasized that “unless the labourer can speak as a representative of associated labourers, he cannot speak with equal power.”

Power, Authority, and Leadership

About power, Follett commented that “whether power is good or bad, whether it is sought as means to end or end in itself, most people are much of the time trying to get power.” The heart of her attitude about the exercise of power was her concept of “power-with rather than power-over.” From this idea, all else follows. She believed that an organization accomplishes its tasks more effectively by creating more power throughout the organization, not by limiting it to those who have nominal authority within a hierarchical structure. The first requirement for genuine power, rather than merely formal authority, is ability. In her words, “We can confer authority; but power or capacity, no man can give or take,” and “genuine power is capacity.”

Chapters on giving orders and on authority discuss the desirability of making authority less arbitrary. The crux of her philosophy in this area is the depersonalization of orders by determining what she called “the law of the situation.” Leadership must guide the group “to see what the situation demands, to discover the law of the situation and to obey that.” And Follett did not necessarily mean those “on top.” “Authority should go with knowledge and experience wherever it is found in the hierarchy of an organization.” An employee could just as well discover the law of the situation and give an “order” to a superior. If orders were depersonalized, she argued, complaints of tyrannical treatment would go away. When mistakes are made, educating, rather than blaming, is more effective. “Nothing stultifies one more than being blamed.” She warned, however, of an opposite evil to too many orders—too few orders, the result of a fear of exercising authority

If one is by now convinced that a “Follettian” organization would be an anarchic organization, the chapter on leadership emphatically belies that impression. She defined an effective leader as one with the “ability to grasp a total situation” as it is developing. A great leader is one who can transform

experience, his or her own and the group's, into power, whose decisions about the present shape the situation as it will unfold in the future. A great leader is one who can, by making all the forces in a group serve a common purpose, bring forth group power rather than express a personal power.

She viewed leadership not as manipulation of people (destructive of trust), but as a science and an art, and she believed that the qualities of leadership can be analyzed and, at least in part, learned. She ridiculed the idea that the most aggressive or dominating person inevitably makes the best leader; in addition she stressed the absolute necessity of a lack of self-importance and pomp in those leading. "If we enjoy being over other people, there will be something in our manner which will make them dislike being under us." She also laid great stress upon the force of example, suggesting that the leader should always be willing to do what he or she asks followers to do: "Sincerity more than aggressiveness is a quality of leadership." She further commented on another aspect of the effective leader: "While there are still men today who try to surround themselves with docile servants . . . with yes, yes men . . . the ablest men today have a larger aim, they wish to be leaders of leaders." "Effective leaders reward dissent, as well as encourage it," because they understand that "reflective back talk increases a leader's ability to make good decisions."

The final chapter, "Business in Society," contains a plea for professionalization of business management, that is, loyalty to a body of principles, loyalty to the "soul of our work," rather than loyalty to the company. "I don't see why businessmen should have lower ideals than artists or professional men." She set a further ideal that businessmen should manage with "style," a word dear to her, which she suggested might mean "attainment and restraint." Especially relevant to arts organizations is her assigning to business "responsibility to educate the public." She insisted that a professional must stick to his or her standards and, if need be, educate the community to appreciate them. Another belief is that through well and inventively managed organizations, all participants can become more "developed human beings."

Others React

How did Follett, this woman in a sea of businessmen, present herself as a person? Editor Pauline Graham says, "Plain in appearance, lacking in style, 'a gaunt Bostonian spinster lady' with a forbidding exterior, Follett nonetheless charmed everyone she met." She is described by Parker as "that bony, charming Bostonian." Lyndall Urwick, recalling his first meeting with Follett, wrote, "In two minutes flat, I was at her feet and remained there 'til the day she died."

This charm, warmth of character, and optimism about people shine through her words, which inspiringly draw one toward her. But, laying aside her charisma, was she too optimistic, utopian, naive? The lone commentator who believes she may have been is Nitin Nohria. His three reasons for doubt:

- ◆ too many people are driven to acquire "power-over" rather than "power-with";

- ◆ the “law of the situation” is often impossible to determine because most situations are ambiguous and uncertain. (He says evidence supports the view that all organizations eventually become divided into or revert to a minority directing and a majority directed—the “iron law of oligarchy”); and
- ◆ many situations are zero-sum and do not have integrative solutions. Someone must be hurt.

Paul R. Lawrence, in an epilogue, strenuously disagrees with Nohria’s pessimism about the “iron law of oligarchy.” He writes of three subsequent waves of organizational theory promoting the Follettian type of organization. In his opinion, each new wave has brought incremental change toward the ideal established by Follett. Nohria himself writes, “Follet’s vision provides the energy to move forward.” (Recent news reports tell of poor long-term business results in many radically downsized companies, compared with competitors who successfully avoided that route. It would appear that Follett’s advice—to search exhaustively for “integrative solutions” to problems that may seem to have only “zero-sum” answers—is still often ignored, but only at some peril.)

But whether paradise is at hand or is still at some remove, it is difficult to imagine anyone disputing the truth of what Rosabeth Moss Kanter terms “Follett’s one principal message: *relationships matter*.” How would Frederick Winslow Taylor (whose work Parker calls the “Genesis” of management history) have approached relationships? With all the finesse of a sledgehammer! “If a worker won’t do what you want him to, ‘make him.’”² I would imagine that anyone who works in a symphony orchestra today would agree that she, not he, is 100 percent right.

To read this collection is to be inspired to believe that American symphony orchestra organizations, in overcoming any unproductive organizational relics of their hierarchical origins, could be both more effective and more humane at the same time.

Notes

¹ Lavigne, Kenneth T., and J. Daniel Robertson. 1994. *Deming’s Profound Changes*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. p. 211.

² ———, p. 34

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