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Book Review: “Up The Organization” by Robert Townsend

In a climate that has actively encouraged entrepreneurship with over 500,000 new businesses started in the first month of 2021 alone, the need for effective leadership is at an all-time high (Salesforce, 2021). In light of this evergreen need, Robert Townsend, former president of Avis Rent-a-Car, has developed specific leadership approaches to level up any organization. After all, Townsend himself lives by the mantra, “big companies are small companies that succeeded” (Townsend, 2007, p. 69). In the book “Up The Organization,” Townsend suggests that great leaders—with purpose, open-mindedness, delegation and communication as top priorities— create an environment where individuals motivate themselves.

As the book aims to reinforce how to stop corporations from stifling people and strangling profits, the central premise surrounds the role humans play in organizational success. In other words, Townsend constantly dances around the idea that great leaders work to create an environment where their employees organically motivate themselves. Although the book discusses dozens of topics, I’ve grouped together key concepts that outline the essential leadership skills for communicators, in particular, with the following categories: leading with purpose; welcoming questions, conflict and change; structuring a hierarchy and delegating internally; and communicating clearly and simply. Firstly, the leading with purpose concept captures the idea of suppressing egotistical pursuits and eliminating two-sided compromises in order to emphasize the importance of leading with a strong, clear, purposeful set of values. As for welcoming questions, conflict and change, Townsend recommends setting benchmarks to reflect on the impact one’s own leadership style has on the organization at large by taking on the

role of an outsider to evaluate. Likewise, amid regular evaluation, it's crucial to recognize room for change in situations in which healthy conflict arises between colleagues. The category of structuring a hierarchy and delegating internally outlines how to apply meaningful responsibility to those in lower-level positions in order to stimulate team growth and make well-informed decisions across affected departments. For communicating clearly and simply, Townsend encourages the use of layman's terms true to the way the organization's audiences—both internal and external—would understand to “[eliminate] the mental gear changes” between different types of company jargon (Townsend, 2007, p. 73).

A key learning I gathered from my readings in “Up The Organization” includes that of Theory Y. According to Townsend, Theory Y aims to deconstruct the assumptions that traditional organizations ineffectively operate on: 1) People hate work. 2) People have to be driven and threatened with punishment to work toward objectives. 3) People like security, aren't ambitious, want to be told what to do, dislike responsibility. Leaders convinced of the aforementioned ideas tend to undermine and disadvantage their employees whereas Theory Y aims to motivate them. Alternatively, Theory Y assumes the following: 1) People don't hate work; it's as natural as rest or play. 2) People don't have to be forced or threatened if they commit to mutual objectives that drive them. 3) People commit to the extent of satisfying ego and development needs. In turn, individuals who ascribe to positive morale, shared objectives and rewarding work promote successful organizations (Townsend, 2007). Theory Y relates strongly to our class lessons about transformational leadership in which leaders conduct behaviors that aim to build relationships, divvy up decision-making and uplifts employees. Particularly, Theory Y can be translated into characteristics of a transformational leader with the following assumptions: 1) Good rapport and personal connection support employees. 2) Group

needs are more worthwhile than self-interested ones. 3) People value enhanced self-worth and shared decision-making power (Smudde, 2014).

Of all the assertions Townsend makes throughout his book, I agree most with his point about motivation. He articulates his approach to motivation best when he said, “you can’t motivate people. That door is locked from the inside. You *can* create a climate in which most of your people will motivate themselves to help the company reach its objectives” (Townsend, 2007, p. 219). Motivation cannot be forced unto employees; it manifests out of authentic passion for the work, where it takes place and whoever is involved. Excellent leaders show their employees how and why they can become motivated instead of merely telling them about the benefits their work can generate. In reality, most benefits that actually serve the employee—not just the organization and its top managers— cannot be enjoyed on the job (Townsend, 2007). So, to assume that motivation will form out of empty incentivization underestimates the need for constant encouragement integrated within the work structure. This point, in particular, resonates with me because it speaks to the impact company culture makes on employees’ experiences and the role top leaders have in fostering a positive atmosphere.

While this version was published in 2007, Townsend originally wrote the book’s first edition in 1970. Thus, many of his thoughts prove to be outdated in a modern sociopolitical context. Consequently, while reading, I found several disagreeable, disappointing arguments that do not align with my personal values nor with diversity, equity and inclusion standards that are commonplace in most organizations today. For one, in the chapter, “Fairness, Justice, and Other Oddities,” Townsend describes injustice only on grounds of differing levels of work performance, in which case, he evidently ignores aspects of intersectionality at play. Townsend bluntly evaluates each human uniformly assuming that every individual experiences life, work

and social systems under the exact same conditions. Likewise, the chapter titled, “Family Baggage,” describes the *worst wives* as those who nag husbands to earn higher wages at work (Townsend, 2007). This notion clearly reflects the traditional male breadwinner archetype that persisted throughout the 1970s. While Townsend uses this nagging wife example to convey the importance of having genuine drive to succeed, not external forces, he does so in a way that reinforces heteronormative, misogynistic tropes.

The aspect of the book that surprised me most was Townsend’s foresight to the current climate of the workforce as we begin to transition out of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the chapter, “Don’t Neglect It,” Townsend describes work schedules that lead to the highest levels of performance and satisfaction. He finds that the most effective system is one with varied office hours and vacation patterns suited for the individual (Townsend, 2007). Surprisingly, our workforce has begun to reflect Townsend’s intuition with the current hybrid system of varied remote and in-office workdays conquering American organizations. As I read through the lens of a senior undergraduate student uncertain about what my own office setting will look like in the near future, I pondered Townsend’s insights. Perhaps the flexible, personalized hybrid format that allows me to choose when I commute to the office or work from home could benefit not only my own experience but the well-being of the whole organization.

In terms of formatting, “Up The Organization” was written and edited to read conversationally. The chapters are organized into brief, digestible sections of straightforward advice, alphabetized by chapter headings. Each chapter names a strategy for adopting an effective leadership style, and Townsend follows with reasons for its significance and anecdotal examples from industry leaders—himself included. The brevity of each chapter and the casual writing style for such an academic topic make the book easy to navigate. It’s safe to say that “Up

The Organization” functions as a handbook of leadership guidelines, simplifying the way practitioners jump around from chapter to chapter as needed.

Overall, I would recommend this book as it offers concise yet informative tips and provides direct answers for a handful of the hard-to-answer questions that arise in business. Although some of the passages included have gone a bit stale since the 1970s, editor’s notes help clarify their modern significance to an extent. With that being said, “Up The Organization” is an exceptionally good read for those leaning into entrepreneurship and business management; however, the relevance to public relations, specifically, cuts down the chapters of importance by approximately a third. Regardless, aspiring public relations practitioners, especially for those who want to strengthen their internal communications or employee relations skills, should undoubtedly add this quick-read to their list of must-reads.

Clearly, Robert Townsend utilizes his own work experience and professional connections in “Up The Organization” to draw attention to key concepts, including leading with purpose; welcoming questions, conflict and change; structuring a hierarchy and delegating internally; and communicating clearly and simply. Although originally published in 1970 and revised for 2007, many of Townsend’s guidelines—from Theory Y assumptions to effective scheduling strategies—are transferable to the workforce today. Through the application of Townsend’s people-first philosophies, public relations practitioners can transform into communications leaders.

References

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