



Book Review for “Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest” by Peter Block

SANDRA L. MOORE

ABSTRACT

his book review discusses Block’s radical Stewardship philosophy which upends traditional leadership and organizational hierarchy paradigms to promote employee equality and engagement. Ombuds can benefit from insight into the complexity and challenges needed to reform organizational dynamics and implement widespread change.

Disclaimer: This book review by Sandra Moore was prepared in my personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this book review are my own and do not reflect the views of f National Reconnaissance Office, Department of Defense or the U.S. Federal Government.

KEYWORDS

Ombuds, Ombudsman, Organization Development, stewardship, organizational reform, patriarchy, hierarchy, collaboration, power, servant leadership



INTRODUCTION

The Dalai Lama said, “With realization of one’s own potential and self-confidence in one’s ability, one can build a better world”. In his book, *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest (2nd ed.)*, Peter Block describes the radical organizational reforms he believes are necessary to create better organizations, communities, and a better world. He envisions organizations which upend the traditional hierarchy and are built upon equality and employee partnership to unleash employee potential and ownership. Block states leadership needs to evolve past selfless, servant leadership to stewardship, which is accepting the accountability for the success of the organization while relinquishing power, control, and decision-making authority to the lowest level. The best decisions are made when employees are empowered to come together as a cross functional team, focus on what the customer needs, and have the authority to do what is needed to implement fully the agreed upon solution. His approach dramatically revolutionizes the way organizations are structured and managed with the goal of creating an egalitarian community with shared ownership and purpose. This book can be helpful to Ombuds in gaining greater insight into complex organizational dynamics, allowing an organization to optimize its outcomes.

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

Block recommends widespread reform within the organization based on key decision points which are interconnected and even codependent with other variables. Block implies the components of his concept are important and interrelated, so this does not appear to be a concept from which an organization can pick and choose options. Block begins by removing excess layers of management to allow the best decisions to be made and implemented at the lowest level. Block advocates ending many traditional perks and rewards he views as perpetuating the traditional “Patriarchy” or parental hierarchy and makes employees dependent upon managers. Block turns employees into partners with ownership and decision-making power, which he terms as choosing “adventure over safety”. He sees equality as part of partnership which means managers need to give up traditional perks and privileges and employees need to be rewarded as a team based on real customer outcomes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Block has been an Organizational Development and Management Consultant for over 25 years and has authored 8 books, including *Flawless Consulting*. He is a partner in *Designed Learning*, which provides training based on Block’s books, including training front line supervisors in stewardship, creating effective teams, and dealing with difficult emotions.

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

The book is based on Block’s over 25 years of organizational consulting experience and includes a dramatized case study. When the book was first published in 1993, it was considered a radical approach to reinventing organizations and became a best seller. The 2nd Edition was updated in 2013 and he added a chapter to expand the book’s application to communities.

The book is divided into 3 parts. The first part details the inherent problems that are integral to a traditional hierarchy structure and how Stewardship is different. The second part focuses on the core principles and some practical considerations of Stewardship to redistribute power and restructure performance evaluations and rewards. The third section addresses additional obstacles and challenges, including managing internal politics and an employee Stewardship Contract.

STRENGTHS



Block provides great insight into the complexity of organizational culture and dynamics. He discusses the key decision points which are an intricately woven web and identifies common pitfalls and mixed messages which can stall or derail progress. Block discusses why management's use of power to impose decisions reduces employee ownership. As an example, he states leaders should not impose mandatory training, but should support providing training requested by the teams. Block views traditional employee performance reports and annual reward programs as economic coercion. He believes teams should be rewarded based on actual outcomes to the customer. Organizational transformation can begin when 25% of employees choose partnership because others will want the freedom the partners have. Block discusses managing the internal politics in his chapter on overcoming "cynics, victims, and bystanders" in which he acknowledges an individual's past truth, while affirming their ability to make decisions moving forward.

WEAKNESSES

Block's Stewardship concept relies heavily on a cross functional team's ability to communicate effectively in a highly collaborative environment to make decisions by consensus without research to support his conclusions. His concept has a critical assumption that individuals have the emotional intelligence and communication skills to work collaboratively to make consensus-based decisions. Employees define their stakeholders, mission and vision, key metrics, and control most decisions. As a principle of partnership, Block states employees have the right to disagree, and must have "absolute honesty"; the failure to do so is "betrayal" of the team.

Under Block's egalitarian system, front line supervisors manage part time and do their fair share of the work. As an active partner, the challenge for managers is balancing when to impose decisions and when to accept the decisions of others. Block states a supervisor should intervene when an employee abuses freedom or directs disruptive behavior at peers. He acknowledges that front line managers need training to deal "with difficult emotions". Block assumes that setting aside self-interest is enough for individuals to forgive past wrongs and rebuild trust which may not be realistic. The Audible version of *Stewardship* includes an interview with a community children's shelter director who cites overcoming unresolved conflict among the staff as her biggest obstacle to implementing stewardship.

Block does not discuss conflict management or what if any role an Ombuds would have. He states supervisors should not be repurposed as coaches. He does not see value in positions which primarily observe, evaluate or manage people. Block states that if an organization chooses to have a coach, the coach should be someone at the same level in the organization.

CONCLUSION

Employee engagement is currently a hot topic for organizations. *Stewardship* offers valuable insight into organizational dynamics. Block implies that partial adoption of Stewardship may be ineffective because the principles are intricately woven together, which made the book slow reading. Block's concept needs further development building conflict competence, emotional intelligence, and communication to create the culture of high trust and the psychological safety to voice disagreement and be a true organizational partner. Block's concept does not address long standing conflict which could stall progress. Block is perhaps unrealistic to assume that a little training can overcome long standing patterns of behavior. An Ombuds could play a vital role in accelerating the culture change towards stewardship by helping individuals and teams to address conflicts as they arise and to promote healthy conflict engagement to sustain a high trust culture, all of which are vital to promoting and maintaining a highly engaged workforce.



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AUTHOR BIO

Sandra Moore has a M.S. in Negotiation and Dispute Resolution from Creighton University, MPA in Health Science from Golden Gate University, and a BS in Occupational Therapy from San Jose State University. Sandra Moore is the Associate Ombuds for National Reconnaissance Office. Previously she was an Organizational Development Specialist for Army Medicine. Sandra Moore has been a Health Care Section Co-leader for Association of Conflict Resolution since 2017.