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Peer to Peer Leadership: Why the Network is the Leader [review] / Baker, Mila N.

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BOOK REVIEWS

PEER TO PEER LEADERSHIP: WHY THE NETWORK IS THE LEADER

By Mila N. Baker
San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler (2014)
Paperback, 179 pages

Reviewed by STANLEY E. PATTERSON

Mila Baker, the author of *Peer to Peer Leadership,* is director of Leadership and Human Capital Management programs and is academic chair of the M.S. in Human Resource Management and Organization Development program at New York University's School for Continuing and Professional Studies. Her purpose for writing this book emerged from her awareness "of how important a leader's work can be for the lives and livelihood of many people, let alone an organization as a whole" (p. xix). She explains this further:

> Going forward I felt it my professional duty, moral obligation, and ethical responsibility to do whatever I could to ensure more positive outcomes that would enhance organizational perform-

ance as well as the quality of life for all those along the chain of command. (p. xix)

Baker applies the analogy of peer to peer information technology "to guide our thinking about a new paradigm for leadership and organizational design" (p. xxi). As such, the focus of leadership and organizational design shifts from the command and control model to a more egalitarian framework in which collective elements of the organization communicate openly and freely within a social framework. She sets this in contrast to the traditional hierarchal designs, which she asserts to have been designed for an industrial model—not the current information age context. In this proposed model, the "node" or collective unit serves as the "leader" rather than a person assigned to that positional responsibility. The node is a part of a "node community" within the organization, with each node functioning within the community as equals (equipotency).

The need for understanding and implementing this model is illustrated by the impact of media and communication technology and the powerful changes they have wrought in the world in which we live. The Arab Spring phenomena that raged across the Middle East and North Africa have unveiled the power of subordinates and followers who have been cast as relatively powerless in the traditional hierarchies affected. Technology and the consequent changes in behavior and attitudes may also be seen in our organizations. "The shift to power of the masses within the organization is unleashing the grip of command and control leadership" (p. 6).

Peer to Peer (P_2P) structure is patterned after its namesake in the field of information technology. Like P_2P in its original setting, P_2P as a leader-

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ship and organization model is an essentially interdependent system wherein each node is "interdependent on the next, making each node responsible and accountable to the whole . . ." (p. 10). This leads to the anticipated question of "Who is in charge?"

An interesting similarity may be found in an examination of the elements of leadership and organization demonstrated in the ancient biblical narrative of the Creation story. God is introduced in Genesis 1:1 as *Elohim,* which indicates God as plural. In verse 26 of that chapter, one of the voices in the context of Divine plurality suggests that man be made after the image and likeness of them. It seems that this suggestion was adopted, but no one person of the godhead is given credit for the suggestion. No one is named as the "boss" of the others. Leadership, it seems, was a cooperative effort in the context of equipotency—not command and control. In the later sacred writings of the Christian church, the organizational structure and the leadership distribution were clearly built on the basis of interdependence, since the gifts (competencies) provided by the Spirit were diversely shared and no one person possessed a full complement of gifts.

Notice the contrast Baker draws between traditional hierarchy and P_2P:

> Where the power of traditional hierarchy was in its static chain of command and its ability to set and maintain boundaries, the power of the node community is in its ability to be dynamic and to shift according to a set of principles that guide how information is sent, received and organized. (p. 29)

In the P_2P model these boundaries are blurred in favor of achieving greater clarity in terms of connectedness. This new arrangement reduces the tendency to filter and interpret information between communities within an organization before it is received. The attendant risk of inaccurate or damaging information is offset by the increased mutual value found in the relationship between nodes and node communities—not in the value of the boundaries that separate them.

Baker asserts that "leadership is a concept that can only be demonstrated in the context of a relational dynamic," and the P_2P model is a relational model of organization and leadership. As such, the outcomes reflect what "we" do rather than what "leadership" (person or persons) have done. If carried to its ultimate conclusion, the term leadership will stop meaning a positional person or collection of persons but will identify the collective outcomes of all people in an organization working cooperatively in relationship. As in all healthy relationships, such a model is built upon social connections "intrinsically expressed in mutual respect, confidence, and trust" (p. 40). It is a model that must intentionally move away from the positional tension that gives rise to competition between persons and the tendency toward self-ascendancy.

Baker makes an assertion that is the basis for my greatest doubts about her P_2P model:

> Neither my role nor my position defines the degree of equality (or lack thereof) that I have as an individual in the organization—each individual serves as an equal and respected peer. I may not contribute the same way as others do, but I make my contribution as an equal. . . . (p. 37)

The force associated with the need to service the ever present needs of human ego requires superhuman intervention. Can we, in an imperfect world apart from control, create an organizational model that is devoid of positional stress associated with

self-ascendant tendencies? The Christian model suggests that we can, making statements like "Consider others before yourself" and "love one another." But these counsels are given in the context of the Christian teaching that the Holy Spirit will transform my human nature after the similitude of Jesus. Can this happen in a pluralistic community?

Baker provides several organizational examples where P$_2$P structure has worked. These are some of the same organizations (not all) cited by other authors for their effectiveness in modeling servant leadership. With an appropriate vision and clear organizational values consistently maintained by the organizational community, P$_2$P has a chance to survive in this imperfect world. A more specific application is the Christian community and nonprofit organizations that are primarily staffed by volunteers. Most of these organizations have modeled their leadership and organizational structures after business and government models. The relational and emotional values that support these institutions and organizations seem to be a perfect context for implementing the P$_2$P model.

I extend my recommendation to you regarding this book by Mila Baker. Her model is well-defined and she explains it well. While it requires some general understanding of leadership history as well as information technology structures, this is not to a degree that would discourage the average reader. Organizational examples are given that support her theme and purpose in writing the book; though these became a bit tedious to read toward the end, they do not diminish the essential value of this book in presenting an actionable model of organization and leadership that challenges the increasingly ineffective command and control model of the industrial age.

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KILL THE COMPANY: END THE STATUS QUO, START AN INNOVATION REVOLUTION

By Lisa Bodell
New York, NY: Bibliomotion (2012)
Hardcover, 264 pages

Reviewed by MIROSLAV DANIHEL

The book under review, *Kill the Company*, is written by Lisa Bodell. A sharp thinker, innovator, management professor and advisor, Bodell is the founder and CEO of futurethink, one of the most influential and internationally recognized innovation research and training firms. In her book, Bodell speaks to what she believes is the biggest downfall of the contemporary corporate culture (complacency, conformity, and lack of leadership) and indentifies killing the company as the solution. After this shocking claim, Bodell dedicates the first half of the book to detailed descriptions of fast and successful ways to kill your own company. As a great teacher, Bodell destroys with the purpose to build. She claims that "only after you've killed your company you will be able to tap into the innovation that will transform it into a killer company" (p. xx). The second half of the book is dedicated to describing innovative ways to lead a company into a new era, building on new foundations, and focusing on developing soft skills. Bodell offers not only innovative ideas, but concrete