BOOK REVIEWS

Stewardship

Stewardship
Peter Block
San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1993.
$24.95

"There is an unmistakable contradiction between the democratic values of freedom and independence and the colonial and patriarchal strategies used to manage our organizations over the last forty to four thousand years ... If we are consistently breeding helplessness in our institutions, which is what patriarchy is good at, it will bleed over into our larger political process" (238, 240).

With these words corporate world guru Peter Block (*The Empowered Manager*) capsulizes the core message of his most recent advice to American business, industrial, educational and public service sectors. Ownership, not patriarchy; full partnership, not parenting: for Block and other "total quality management" prophets, the healthy survival of American organizations of all types rests in participatory governance and operations. In a world increasingly dependent upon customer services, timely change to those customer needs, top-down management represents obsolescence and atrophy.

At the heart of the problem, Block insists, are hypocrisy and privilege: "While we are members of a society that protects freedom of speech, choice and the rights of the individual, the lived reality is that we work in places that are managed with beliefs that view the underlying democracy with deep skepticism if not contempt" (40). To make the necessary transition from patriarchy requires more than sending upper-level management to Deming seminars: "What remains untouched is the belief that power and purpose and privilege can reside at the top and the organization can still learn how to serve its stakeholders and therefore survive ... Focusing power and purpose at one point in an organization, usually at the top, has over time the impact of destroying the culture and the very outcomes we sincerely intend to create" (12, 13).

The changes necessarily must come from within the core workers of the organization with the able assistance of sincere administrators who willingly commit themselves to a "full partnership," including doing the core work, building team service goals from within the team, and passing the power at all levels of the organization to those responsible for the work.

SO: vision statements arise from those envisioning, not from the executives or Board of Directors; organizational information flows freely, including financial data; work performance expectations are set by the workers; success is measured by those who do the work. In all cases, reports and responsibility flow up, down and sideways through the organization. All have a stake in success; all are accountable.

"And what," management and the boss ask, "makes you think this will work?" Citing the successful experiences of Japanese and American businesses dedicated to this concept, Block answers, the pride of partnership and the motivation of self-interest. "Stewardship is for those managers and workers who are willing to risk the class distinctions and privileges that signified their ca-

reers, in the pursuit of living out a set of values and creating an organization where each member has a sense of ownership and responsibility" (48). Clearly change requires more than companies and managers with faith and commitment to such a transformation.

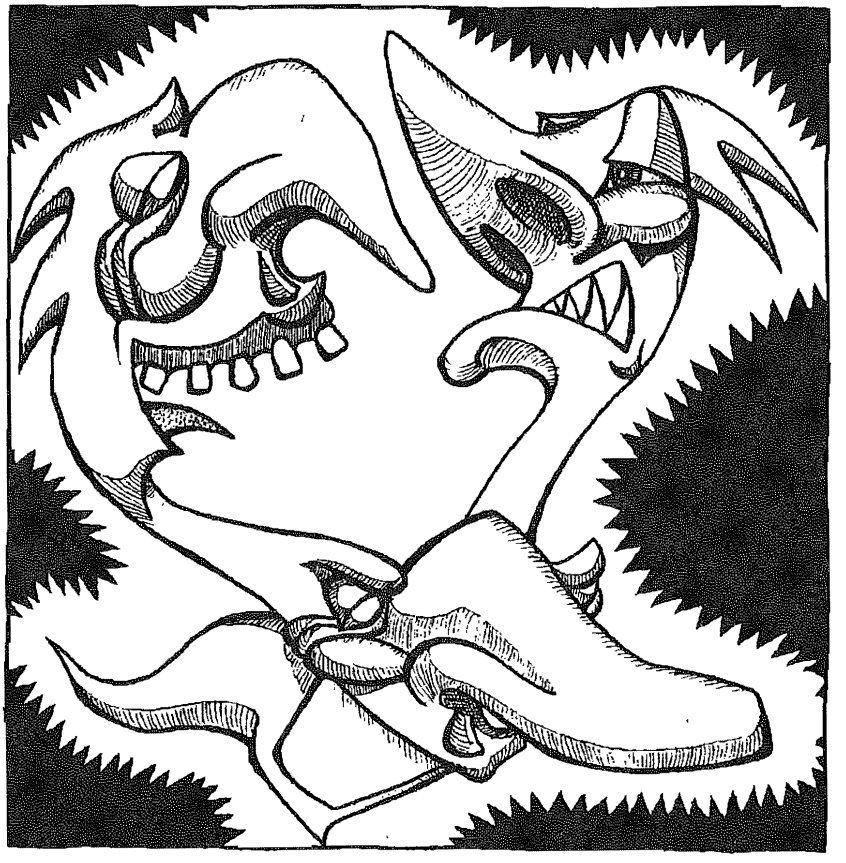
Indeed, the toughest transformation is among the workers themselves, Block insists, for partnership means giving up a significant working class privilege: security, the desire to be taken care of by the organization, the wish to have one's future secured. American workers, be they elementary teachers or college professors, computer programmers or middle managers, have dominantly chosen dependency and security, a choice that reinforces autocratic management: "Dependency rests on the belief that there are people in power who know what is best for others, including ourselves ... Dependency is the collusion required for patriarchy and parenting to endure" (8).

Unfortunately, while we complain about what "they" are doing to "us," for reasons of self-interest we accept the continuing norm: "Our complaint is generally not about the weakness of patriarchy as as system of governance, it is that we believe that we need a better patriarch" (6). That, he insists, will continue to starve the "spirit" and doom such top-down organizations in the world to come.

As an active consultant, futurist, and pragmatist, Block knows of hopeful signs in both large and small organizations, in leaders, managers and workers who doggedly pursue the dream of partnership. Although targeting primarily the corporate world, Stewardship gives strong space to the site-based management direction of many school systems. Why, he wonders, should a staff support person, the "curriculum specialist," have more power over curricular reform "than the classroom teacher, who personifies the delivery system in each building?" (119)

The formation of community steering committees of central administrators, parents, teachers and students sends the right message to a community wishing to partner its educational system: get involved, take ownership, assert the educational democratic principle historically at the heart of American public education. Then set subcommittees of the same constituents at work on questions of curriculum, delivery and choice of courses, the structure of teaching, purchasing and budgeting, new school planning, hiring and evaluation decisions — in short, on the entire spectrum of concerns affecting every corner of the educational system (216).

Yes, there is still a place for the boss under this system, Block notes, although he's not too sure about middle managers. With a more experienced, comprehensive view of the educational or corporate worlds, the boss still has to set parameters based on financial and operational realities. However, full informational flow must characterize such executive directives: "If knowledge is power, then patriarchal governance is very selective about what gets reported, when and to whom ... Full disclosure is a critical dividing line between parenting and partnership ... Stewardship means all employees need to know the truth about where we stand" (92). Without such information, partners cannot make informed decisions vital to the organization's success. Not to have full financial information, for example, builds false or bo-



gus planning, inevitably undercutting any project.

How many school principles, superintendents or college presidents practice this principle? And what level of distrust, undercutting, morale problems and lack of participation does hiding information cause?

For Block, the place to begin is personal and spiritual: "Stewardship seeks the successful integration of the spirit, the marketplace, and politics ... This means that each reform effort begins as an act of faith and gets built when responsibility and commitment are widely shared" (227). Finally, he insists, we must abandon the corporate, or school district's, or college's comfortable parental, patriarchal "womb" and be born into responsibility for our organization's and our own future by investing ourselves in a healthy workplace future. The people who do the work must take the initiative; the history of patriarchy clearly reveals that relinquishing power and privilege *cannot* be initiated by executives; human nature runs against it, even in the face of today's market realities. When the reserved parking slot goes on the block, the heels begin digging in. Besides, too many corporate boards are loaded with the patriarchs, male and female, who see the success of the future only in terms of the success of the past.

In the face of increasing economic pressures, is such a revolution possible? As budgets are cut, as corporate boards and executives become increasingly conservative and directive, can Block's view triumph? Well, he insists, precisely *because* of the market pressures and the public's increasing howl for credibility and change, the time is perfect for students and teachers, parents and tax-beleaguered senior citizens to assert participative control and democratic practices.

Yes, of course it's frightening and full of uncertainties. Welcome to life! "The safe path is to wait until the doubts have disappeared before we choose. This is the sorrow of the unlived life," Block muses (228).

His prescription is not fanciful. In the second and third parts of his book the author offers practical political and operational advice based on his experiences and those of others in the trenches. This well written, attractively formatted book recasts the views of other significant recent books on building a new structure for American enterprise, business and private, industrial and educational, books like *Thriving on Chaos, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and *The Fifth Discipline*. His "Lost and Found" section, a narrative bibliography, cites both consultant-experts and worker-experts, such as Patrick Dolan of Dolan and Associates, an organization focused on education reform, Larry Lezotte of Effective Schools Products, and Vickie Markovitch, a school superintendent dedicated to educational partnerships.

In a climate where business patriarchs take great delight in faulting educational reform, Peter Block's *Stewardship* offers a refreshing, congenial, no-nonsense alternative to more of the same old medicine. Written readably and sensibly, Block's book should be at the top of the stack of books for anyone serious about reclaiming our education future.

In *Servant Leadership* by Robert K. Greenleaf, one of Block's spiritual mentors, the former notes: "The first order of business is to build a group of people who under the influence of the institution, grow taller and become healthier, stronger, more autonomous."

In closing, Block writes, "My security is discovered by experiencing my freedom and using it in service of something outside myself ... What will it take for me to claim my own freedom and create an organization of my own choosing?" (236-37)

Such lyricism plus practical advice pervade Stewardship. On the success of its message rides the heart of the success of every child's education: take control of your life and contribute to the betterment of every other human life. The patriarchs will not do it for us.

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