Book Reviews

Kenyon B. De GREENE

The Adaptive Organisation: Anticipation and Management of Crisis
Wiley, Chichester, 1982, xvii + 394 pages

This is an important book. It is also one which is enjoyable, indeed stimulating, to read. This makes it somewhat of a rarity in management literature so much of which is turgid, which means little read.

The theme is one well rehearsed over the last decade: that the world is in a dangerous condition and we must change our ways. The list of problems is familiar: high population densities leading to pressure on natural environments for food, water and material resources; inequality of distribution; breakdown of traditional societies accelerated by cheap and rapid communication; capability for 100 megaton nuclear exchanges. This is not a 'doom' book however. Professor De Greene is concerned to assemble ideas which may facilitate the redesign of the organisations which do the world's work in such a way that they are flexible, robust, that is to say adaptive in the increasingly turbulent and uncertain situations in which they must operate.

The book is organised in eight chapters. It starts by reviewing some general concepts of organisation and management, emphasising a cybernetic or systems view. It goes on to criticise the principal approaches to organisational problems which have developed over the last twenty years. The next two chapters discuss the problems of organisational dynamics and of forecasting respectively. Chapter five, entitled "Emergence", is perhaps the key to the book and summarises new theories of the ways in which complex systems evolve their characteristic forms. Chapters six and seven deal with attributes of different parts of the external organisational environment and then with the 'internal' environments. Lastly Chapter eight outlines a basic design for an adaptive organisation.

A recurring idea is that the kind of theory, largely developed in the more placid sixties, based on linear, single objective models exploring small, statistically describable, departures from a single equilibrium point, offers only severely limited guidance in the world in which we now find ourselves. New approaches are needed.

Professor De Greene's book provides an admirably comprehensive and insightful introduction to developments in this direction. It can be placed, perhaps, in the genre of Ackoff and Beer. It would be a great pity if the style of writing, which sometimes slips more in the direction of Alvin Toffler (The Third Wave), were to deter serious readers who might see it as journalism. There is no more important work than that of learning how to evolve rapidly designs for organisations which are both humane and effective. The new information technology alone is likely to require this capability. The urgency of the world's problems makes this work an imperative for all to contribute. A book to read and to think about.

The book itself is well printed and produced. A minor irritation is that the footnote references are numbered sequentially in the text of each chapter but the footnotes themselves when collected by chapter at the end of the book are numbered according to an alphabetic listing of the authors.

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General Systems Thinking: Its Scope and Applicability
Volume 4 in: General Systems Research Series.
North-Holland, New York, 1981, xii + 234 pages, Dfl. 85.00

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North-Holland Publishing Company
How general should General Systems Thinking be to be instructive and informative? The appropriate level of generality and aggregation depends on the problems and phenomena of interest. The book invites the reader to a guided tour through the universe at all levels from micro to macro. The General Systems approach acts as a comprehensive and synthetic perspective revealing the unity of the sciences. In this approach the world is viewed as a multilevel system that can be described in terms of systems science. It is quite understandable that such a trip opens broad vistas, but that in the end the reader is left behind with a limited outlook in face of the complexity and diversity of the world, because every description is an approximation only.

Chapter 1 is devoted to general characteristics of systems and Chapter 2 to simple stable order systems i.e. atomic and molecular systems. Chapters 3 and 5 treat the universe as a physical system and a biosphere, respectively. Chapter 4 is concerned with steady state or morphostatic systems. Chapters 6 and 7 describe psychic systems in a General Systems setting. Concepts like equilibrium, stress, development, inertia and defense are explained in Chapter 8. Psychosocial interaction, micro- and macrosocial systems are discussed in Chapters 9 through 11. A final chapter dealing with General Systems Theory as Philosophy proclaims an existential science of possible relations.

For the interested layman who dislikes mathematical formulae but who wants a panoramic vision over the universe and a brief survey of the pertinent disciplines from a verbal systems point of view, the book can be recommended. The scientific specialist, however, will probably find too little detailed and quantitative information to satisfy his needs although it may serve as a global orientation to other fields aside from his own specialization. The book presents a valuable introduction to verbal systems theory and its applications, but doesn’t reveal the full pervasive integrating power of the formal and mathematical systems approach. The absence of a bibliography – quite indispensable for further study – is regrettable. Only sparse foot-notes refer to the rich and abundant literature of General Systems Theory. Nevertheless, the audacious endeavour of the author to offer a helicopter view of the world is admirable.

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