

The Reflective Practitioner*

BOOKS OF INTEREST

THRIVING ON CHAOS: HANDBOOK FOR A MANAGEMENT REVOLUTION

by Tom Peters

Harper and Row, 1988. Paperback \$10.95; hardcover \$19.95.

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The basic question with *Thriving on Chaos* is how much a book written specifically for American business executives can apply to school principals. As I read the introduction on the current international business climate and the fix in which the American economy finds itself, I became skeptical about the book and expected to take few notes on things that applied directly to my work. Wouldn't my time be better spent catching up on *Kappan* and *Education Leadership*?

But when I tore myself away from the book many hours later, I found I had written down about eighty per cent of the major points! Although the book has almost no material that is education-specific, it is all about the generic skills and beliefs that good school leaders have in their hearts. In fact, of all the books and articles I've read about leadership, in general, and the principalship, in particular, this is the best. I absorbed the central message about leadership, learned a great deal of specific business advice that applies to education, had some of my policies reinforced and some bad tendencies squelched. I highly recommend *Thriving on Chaos* to fellow principals, especially the chapter entitled, "Learning to Love Change: A New View of Leadership at All Levels."

But don't think you can get the meat of this book quickly! This is no slim One-Minute Manager-type book that you can breeze through at lunch. There are 653 densely-printed pages,

and every one is packed with well-organized, well-written analysis or case studies from successful and not-so-successful businesses. The book is organized into a carefully-thought-out paradigm of effective management. Here are the five basic points of the book:

- Be obsessed with responsiveness to the customer (in our case, students and their parents)
- Pursue fast-paced innovation in all areas of the operation
- Achieve flexibility by empowering people
- Provide leadership that loves changes and projects an inspiring vision
- Control by means of simple support systems aimed at measuring the "right stuff"

Peters admits that it's hard to do all this at once, but asserts that "if you fail to get on with almost all of this agenda at a brisk pace, you're in for trouble." This caveat is based on his assertion that American business is on the ropes in the world economic arena. Doesn't that sound like what's being said about American public education? Isn't the challenge just as urgent, and aren't his recommendations reminiscent of the second wave of school reform literature we're now reading?

The purpose of most book reviews is to give the reader a capsule of the book so you can declare it read. But there's no way I can do justice to this book, and my real desire is to get you to pick it up in the next block of free time you have. Here are a few tantalizing tidbits to give the flavor:

- Quote from an Apple Computer executive: "I don't think you should ever manage anything that you don't care about passionately."
- Quote: "Most quality programs fail for one of two reasons: they have system without passion, or passion without system. You must have both."
- Complaint statistics: The average person who has been burned by a company tells nine or ten colleagues, but few tell the company (or school). Most won't come back (or if they have no choice but to come back to a

public school will be negative, uninvolved, and bitter participants in the enterprise). But industry studies show that you can get eighty-two to ninety-five per cent to return if you resolve the complaint in a timely and thoughtful fashion. In fact, there is evidence that customers are more loyal after this kind of resolution than if the problem had never occurred.

- Advice to managers (coupled with an anecdote about a manager finding a minor typo on page two of a brochure about to be mailed to thousands of customers, already sealed and stamped): Starting this afternoon, don't walk past a shoddy product or service without comment and action — ever again!" (Needless to say, he thinks the manager should throw away the mailing and fix the typo.)
- "What gets measured gets done."

But the troops must be involved in the measurement process.

- When quality goes up, costs go down. (Education parallel: If children learned how to read in the lower grades, the remediation and damage-control costs in the upper grades would plummet.)

- Emphasize the intangibles. Call people and see how things are going.

Get out of your office. Become obsessed with listening to customers and employees. Ring doorbells. Listen, listen, listen.

- Under-promise and over-deliver. Surprise people. A pilot tells his passengers that they'll have to wait forty-five minutes before they take off. The plane takes off in thirty minutes, and people are delighted. The same delay would have caused anger if the pilot had said it would be a fifteen-minute delay before take-off.

- Achieve uniqueness as an organization, and make sure everyone knows what's special about their outfit.

Project an inspiring vision that can be stated in twenty-five words or less that everyone knows.

- Make the front-line workers into heroes. Reward excellence — big rewards for one to two per cent of the workforce, lots of little rewards for small acts of heroism. (The Baltimore Transit Authority gave gift certificates

* Also a book of interest to educators: *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think In Action*, by Donald Schön. Basic Books, 1984. Paperback \$11.95.

and movie tickets to bus drivers who did exceptionally well.)

- Respond with almost unimaginable promptness to customer whims.
- Invest in lots of small, experimental projects versus full-blown proposals. "Every school district (and school)... should be a hotbed of little trials."
- Systematically promote word-of-mouth campaigns about your product; people buy based on the perceptions of respected peers.
- Support passionate innovators within the organization. There's always someone "out there" who's willing to try something new. Empower them.
- Support "fast failures" — make people unafraid to innovate and fail.
- Have the guts to ask dumb questions.
- The top property manager of Marriott in Albuquerque, New Mexico makes a regular practice of sending out at least 100 thank you notes a month to his staff for jobs well done. "You don't think you can find 100 things worth saying thank you for?" asks Peters. "That's a prime indication that you are out of touch."
- Spend time lavishly on hiring, and involve line people in the process.
- Hire less on paper credentials than on core human qualities that the organization values. Says hugely successful grocer Stew Leonard, "We can teach cash register. We can't teach nice."
- Eliminate bureaucratic rules and humiliating conditions — the policies and practices (almost always tiny) that demean and belittle human dignity. Nordstrom (an upscale two billion dollar West coast clothier) has a one-sentence policy manual for its employees: "Use your own best judgement at all times."
- Be out and about. Listen and provide listening forums. Promote those who deal best with paradox.
- Demand total integrity.

Are you intrigued? Give it a try. If you're short of time, start on page four hundred seventy-two.



Reviewer *Kim Marshall*, Principal of the Mather Elementary School in Boston, MA.