

AN EVERYONE CULTURE: BECOMING A DELIBERATELY DEVELOPMENTAL ORGANIZATION

by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, with Matthew L. Miller, Andy Fleming, and Deborah Helsing

Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2016. 308 pp. \$32.00 (hardcover).

In *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization*, authors Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey explore the potential of the workplace to promote adult development—the amalgam of phenomena that increase intellectual and psychological complexity over the lifespan. Examining the experiences of three exemplar companies, Next Jump, Decurion, and Bridgewater, this book distills the unique characteristics of “deliberately developmental organizations” (DDOs) and the practices necessary to sustain them. While the authors concede that intentionally designing and managing organizational culture to promote employee growth is deeply challenging and unlikely to fit every workplace, they conclude that with principled implementation, the DDO approach is good for people as well as profit.

An Everyone Culture is organized into seven chapters and an epilogue that examine Next Jump, Decurion, and Bridgewater from a number of perspectives, including those of founders, top managers working to evolve DDO practices, and employees focused on their own developmental goals. Recognizing that readers may be challenged by the principles of the DDO, the processes of personal growth that these DDOs deploy, and/or the companies’ approach to the bottom line, the authors advise readers to “choose the best sequence through the book” (p. 6), offering a number of alternative sequences tailored to readers’ learning goals and characteristics. For example, “If you prefer to see the big picture before you look at living instances . . . you may prefer a more deductive sequence, beginning with chapters 2 and 3 and then moving to chapter 1” (p. 7).

Chapter 1, “Meet the DDOs,” introduces the reader to each company, its core business, and a few of its signature DDO strategies. Next Jump is an e-commerce marketplace. Its DDO slogan, “Better Me + Better You = Better Us” (p. 20), reflects the company’s belief that each employee must be committed not only to continuous individual growth but also to supporting others in learning from risk and failure. Decurion Corporation is a privately held corporation with real estate and entertainment interests that strives to connect all work—from taking cinema tickets and making popcorn—to powerful values such as hospitality. For this company, development is deeply tied to making work personally meaningful. Bridgewater is one of the best-performing hedge funds in the world. As one of the few funds to make money during the Great Recession, the company attributes its success to relentless commitment to facing the truth, including personal shortcomings and mistakes. Together, these examples show that “a deliberately developmental culture is rooted in the unshakable belief that business can be an ideal context for people’s growth,

evolution and flourishing—and that such personal development may be the secret weapon for business success” (p. 55) in a “volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world” (p. 2).

Chapter 2, “What Do We Mean by Development?” explores adult development theory, clearly delineating between “the development of a career” (p. 57) and “the development of the person having the career” (p. 58). In the context of the DDO, development consists of detectable growth in “mind-sets, or meaning-making logics”; is supported by science, including reliable “means of measurement”; and “adds business value” (p. 77). Adult development is characterized by periods of growth in mental complexity punctuated by plateaus. Moving from one plateau to the next is neither easy nor guaranteed. Rather, progress requires a rigorous “curriculum,” an ongoing series of real-world experiences that provoke learning and growth. Setting the conditions for successfully navigating that curriculum, the authors argue, “has a business value,” at least in part because demand for employees with more complex mind-sets “will intensify in the years to come” (p. 77).

Chapter 3, “A Conceptual Tour of the DDO: Edge, Home, and Groove,” presents three core elements of DDOs. According to the authors, all three are essential to achieving the trusting, challenging, meaningful environment that sustains adult development in the work context. *Edge* refers to developmental aspirations. At its most effective, the DDO delivers on both organizational and individual aspirations. *Home* reflects the degree to which the organization fosters community and builds trust. Without genuine trustworthiness, the practices of the DDO would be manipulative at best and overpowering at worst. *Groove* is the constellation of developmental practices engaged by the organization.

Underlying the DDO is the assumption that in most organizations, employees spend too much time and expend too much energy “covering up their weakness . . . hiding their inadequacies, hiding their uncertainties, hiding their limitations” (p. 1). Thus, developmental practices are a means to uncover perceived and actual limitations, the edge of effective performance, and attend to them in various ways: “At all three companies, if you can perform all your responsibilities to a high level, you are no longer in the right job” (p. 99). Mastery of job functions and skills indicates the need for new challenges, new opportunities to “run into plenty of useful trouble” (p. 99), a key ingredient for individual and organizational learning. Although edge, home, and groove are essential for the DDO, the DDO is “more than the sum of its parts” (p. 118). Because developmental work is difficult and at times painful, the DDO must also make use of people’s strengths, promote interdependence, and foster trustworthy leadership.

Chapter 4, “In the Groove: Practices and Practicing to Create an Everyone Culture,” argues that “simply copying DDO practices doesn’t work”; rather, “you must also pay attention to creating the culture of practice, helping people adopt the spirit, intentions and mind-set of practice rather than those of

performance” (p. 124). As an example, Bridgewater has developed an app managers refer to as “the issues log” to collect questions, mistakes, problems, and errors in real time. Individuals are identified by others in the issues log. The responsible party is expected to respond, and their responses are also subject to peer evaluation using the app. “Everyone is getting and giving feedback on how he’s doing his job” (p. 127), according to the CEO. The issues log is believed to help employees develop skills for full transparency, identify developmental tasks in need of attention, and elucidate root causes of problems faced by individuals as well as the company. An organization’s groove, or DDO culture, performs five functions: externalizing internal struggles, connecting the work of the business to individual development, focusing on processes that produce outcomes, developing tools to support the DDO paradigm, and systematically “stretching” everyone in the organization every day.

Chapter 5, “But Is This Any Way to Run a Business? The Strictly Business Value of Being a DDO,” is dedicated to assessing whether the DDO approach is good for business. By evaluating time-honored business metrics as well as the expressed goals of the three companies, the authors conclude that it is. They concur with executives at Bridgewater, Next Jump, and Decurion who “feel certain that their cultures create their business success” (p. 164) in areas ranging from profitability to employee retention. That said, the authors caution that the challenges of creating a DDO culture may not be worth it for some organizations. Specifically, organizations operating in a “volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world” (p. 2) depend on employees’ increasingly complex meaning making for continued marketplace success, but those facing technical challenges with known solutions may not add value to their company by investing in adult development.

We are not always the best judge of our own challenges, however. Chapter 6, “Uncovering Your Biggest Blind Spot: What You’d Be Working on in a DDO,” introduces Kegan and Lahey’s signature tool, the immunity to change (ITC) exercise. Readers are guided through a four-step process for uncovering how individuals work against their own, outwardly stated goals in order to protect hidden or competing commitments and assumptions.

In Chapter 7, “Creating Home: Getting Started toward Becoming a DDO,” the authors share profiles from companies that are just beginning to explore and deploy DDO practices. These exemplars face myriad challenges that Next Jump, Decurion, and Bridgewater do not. For example, they are publicly held, decentralized, staffed by tens of thousands of workers, and led by technical specialists such as doctors or accountants. The authors introduce a number of tools to assess readiness for, motives for, and progress in becoming deliberately developmental, including a “360 assessment for DDO-ness” (p. 279).

In the epilogue, the authors argue that the DDO framework offers an alternative to the 1960s human potential movement “and its current manifestations—positive psychology [and] strength-based assessment” (p. 284). While

the developmental theory undergirding DDOs has generated significant empirical evidence over the past 30 years, these other theories have not. In part, this failure results from an overly optimistic view of development:

The study of human potential requires a genuinely developmental theory, one that can illuminate the gradual evolution of capabilities. Rather than see strengths and limits as absolute, immutable dichotomies, such a theory would recognize that over time a strength can become a limit that may need to be transcended. (p. 284)

The empirically supported idea that we each continue to evolve in complexity and mental capacity throughout our lives—and do so by performing meaningful, challenging work—offers powerful possibilities.

An Everyone Culture acknowledges that the processes of becoming a DDO (and working in one) are not easy. All of the case studies are early adopters. There are no counterexamples, no companies where attempts at “DDO-ness” failed, no examination of the consequences when home failed to emerge or the groove was not deep enough or sustainable enough. Thus, it is not yet possible to assess the organizational or personal costs of such failures.

It is important to note just how high the stakes may be. The authors argue that the DDO is premised on making “personal learning public” (p. 120). At Bridgewater, for example, every meeting is recorded—there is no off-the-record talk around the watercooler. Any time an employee is talked about by others, the individual is informed with the expectation that he or she will access the recording and respond to the content. The visibility and scrutiny of such practices necessitate ethical leadership committed to fostering community-wide trustworthiness. Kegan and Lahey acknowledge that “even one violation—even one experience of someone using your weaknesses against [you], that presenting your whole self, warts and all, diminishes rather than enhances your standing—is enough to compromise the trustworthiness of the community” (p. 121). However, they fail to explore the potential consequences of such a violation for those who have done the work of making themselves vulnerable. It is not difficult to imagine that such violations could occur, but readers are left to wonder about the potential professional and psychological harm to individuals.

Still, possibilities abound. Early in the book, the authors argue that workers typically perform two jobs: the one they’re paid for and a hidden one of trying to look good by covering up mistakes, managing expectations, and pretending to have answers. The DDO recognizes that we all have weaknesses, blind spots, and egos, but it views “members’ inadequacies or incompetencies as a resource” (p. 99). The commitment to ongoing development, however bruising it may be along the way, strips away the need for covering up and avoidance. *An Everyone Culture* is full of stories where workers tackle their imperfections, establish deeply meaningful relationships, and achieve at levels they never imagined

possible. In every case, becoming a “better me” results in increased capacity to contribute to others at work, at home, and in the community.

It remains to be seen whether DDOs catch on or somehow morph. But with the authors’ guidelines for “Being Deliberately Developmental without a DDO” (pp. 235–236), you can get started on your own.

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