

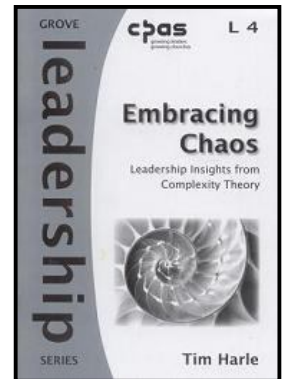
Book Review

Tim Harle, *Embracing Chaos: Leadership Insights from Complexity Theory*, Grove Books, L4, 2011

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First thoughts: Isn't Tim Harle's booklet otiose? Why should church leaders be encouraged to embrace chaos? Isn't that the default pattern?

Second thoughts: of course, Harle doesn't mean that church leadership should be based on happenstance and improvised incompetence, however much that might be the way we *experience* church leadership. Rather, he sets out to describe the ways in which complexity theory, a discipline originating in the more outré regions of the physical sciences, could apply to human structuring, organization and welfare. This is a venerable exercise in leadership studies, a discipline which has frequently sought to adapt external models of reality to its own needs.



But Harle is not carelessly adopting "quantum" vocabulary for the sake of fashion (see Malcolm Gladwell). He makes a good case that the best forms of human organization come from, paradoxically, lack of organization. His initial image suggests the power of the concept: a self-regulating coffee queue at a conference is often far more effective at serving coffee than a closely supervised one.

Harle explores how this success comes at a cost— loss of control for the leadership. He gives specific examples of "Newtonian" and "emergent" change management (the church does not always shine in these examples!), and anchors his thesis in a series of scriptural challenges: Ephesians 4, Mark 10, Matthew 25. Counter-intuitively (and counter-culturally) he tells us that the "small things" matter: individual encounters can have profound social and political effects (for example, Rosa Parks), but they are also important in themselves— treating others as people worthy of being treated well. Consistency in relationships is far more effective than edicts, and far truer to what Jesus modelled in his relationships and teaching.

The restrictions of the booklet format meant that Harle was unable to explore more fully questions of power and its abuse. In a culture in which self-esteem and organizational effectiveness is often dependent upon a clear position within a hierarchy (the Frost Report "Class Sketch" still applies), it would be interesting to see a deeper exploration of these questions: perhaps his next subject?

Martin Cassini's work on traffic control is another datum supporting the same thesis: removing traffic lights and restructuring road use from a "priority" to "equality" basis speeds traffic and at the same time reduces injuries. Regulation, direction and the sleeping policeman are actually the problem, and not the solution. Harle succeeds in presenting this uncomfortable and yet provoking thought: perhaps leaders are more effective the less they act like leaders?

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