

Veldsman, T.H. (2002) *"Into the people effectiveness arena: Navigating between chaos and order"*, Randburg, South Africa: Knowledge Resources, 364 pages.

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In a noteworthy new South African management text, Theo Veldsman, consultant in the strategic human resource management (SHRM) field, brings together the fruit of many years of experience and thought on people management issues in an exciting new way.

Viewing people as the "centre piece" of an increasingly complex, dynamic and hence unstable organisational world, the author unpacks a comprehensive framework for thinking about and finding one's way in the third millennium organisation. Familiar (but refreshingly 'fresh-knitted') management and organisational behaviour concepts are discussed extensively in a series of "Perspectives" (chapters) dealing, amongst others, with: strategy, leadership, governance, design, learning and growth, resources, and ecosystem. The range of ideas presented in the book, which contains many novel diagrams and sub-diagrams (on the face of it all self-explanatory), covers a gamut of strategic people management issues and variables. The present review can therefore only highlight certain key aspects.

*"Into the people effectiveness arena"* is essentially a contribution to the growing 'models for management' literature, a genre that aims to provide conceptual guidelines and tools that will hopefully assist a beleaguered business leadership to successfully cope in an increasingly volatile world. Minimally, if it achieves nothing else, the book should put to rest simplified approaches to management, such as conceiving it merely to be about "planning, organising...controlling", or some other limited scheme, which were so popular in the past.

Accompanied by a rich profusion of diagrams, flowcharts and checklists on virtually every page, various "forces and counter-forces sweeping the people effectiveness arena" (p9), are discussed at some length in thirteen chapters (excluding the first and last chapters), referred to by the author as "Perspectives from the Front Line". The following offers a sampling of chapters, roughly in sequence of exposition: *"In search of the holy grail of world-class competitiveness"*; *Forging excellence through and from change*"; *Navigating galaxies of leadership stars*"; *Implementing skills flexibility successfully*"; *Knitting the organisation together*"; *Making the future present tense*"; *Organisational marriages*; *A future South Africa*".

In a word: this is a 'sweeping book about sweeping matters' which should appeal to HRM practitioners, consultants, academics and managers engaged in or concerned with strategic thinking at corporate level. It presents some genuinely innovative conceptual 'knitting' ('mosaic' would perhaps be a more suitable term), but at the same time it is also not a conventional do-it-yourself human resource management publication. In addition, the systematic presentation of the subject matter also makes it an attractive text for business management and SHRM courses in the higher education sector.

However, considering the above comments (and despite the general high-quality of the book) there is a danger that its aim, namely, to provide an approach and guidelines for: *"...successfully navigat(ing) the heat generated in the People Effectiveness Arena"* (p11) may prove to be difficult to translate into effective practice by all but the most astute and resourceful, and then largely, also, within the corporate planning and consulting milieus. The book's main strength can be seen as also reflecting a possible weakness, namely, that it is conceptually so wide-ranging, that chances are that many HRM practitioners and managers operating in more circumscribed environments may find a coherent interpretation (not to mention implementation) of the many valuable ideas a daunting task. Although it is certainly not the author's aim, nor wish, for his text to be treated as a 'high-level cook book' or some interesting new source of 'quotable management quotes', there is the real likelihood of HRM practitioners as well as managers getting lost 'among its trees' and therefore being tempted to use one or more of the many frameworks inappropriately and/or out of context, or simply ignoring the overall approach for some preferred sub-framework or part of the model.

It is a conceptually innovative and competently written text that forces the reader to re-think the modern organisation. But, as so often happen in book-writing ventures, a number of regrettable flaws occur. Apart from the odd, very brief, concluding remarks, no chapter summaries are given. Again, although it is attractive as a possible academic text, it falls significantly short of the now accepted (outcomes based, learner-friendly) format in educational material (discussion questions, self-assessment exercises, case studies etc at the end of each chapter). Perhaps, then, this is not meant to (also) be an academic text (which would be a pity).

More significantly, the use of terms such as: "chaos and order", "navigating galaxies" and "requisite complexity" in the end seem to merely serve as metaphoric dressing (and, perhaps, to enhance the marketability of the book), yet its prominence in the text (starting with the title page) creates the expectation that cutting-edge insights of the new science of complexity, and especially of dynamic, self-regulating systems, are to form a major part of the author's conceptual frameworks. However, with the exception of a reference to the popularising book by Margeret Wheatly (*"Leadership and the New Science"*), none of this literature (very important when adopting a framework of countervailing forces, as Dr Veldsman essentially does in his book) is incorporated. Surprisingly, also, the author's use of the term "requisite complexity" does not acknowledge the existence and source of the original and now classical concept by Ashby (his so-called Law of Requisite Variety).

Nevertheless, and in conclusion, this is an important, thought-provoking book written in an authoritative (if somewhat dense) manner and will be a welcome addition on the shelf of the practising manager as well as consultant involved in strategic management. It deserves respect by all serious management thinkers.