



The Relational Manager: Transform Your Workplace AND Your Life

by Michael Schluter & David John Lee

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■ reviewed by Tim Harle

This book contains many case studies and personal stories.

One relates how an individual staying at an unfamiliar hotel in Indonesia was unexpectedly upgraded from a basic room to the presidential suite. The reason? The hotel's General Manager remembered the kindness with which the guest had treated him two decades previously in Singapore, when he was a bellhop carrying bags. 'Every time you came, you treated me just as grandly as you treated your friend, the General Manager' (p.129). Now the former bellhop had an opportunity to reciprocate.

This episode encapsulates this book's distinctive approach. In many ways, it is extraordinarily ordinary. In other ways, it throws down a radical challenge to the individualised West. 'Managers no longer ask themselves, "Who am I?" but "Who is us?"' (p.101).

The book emanates from the Cambridge-based Relationships Foundation. The authors have collaborated before: readers of this latest book are referred to their *The R Factor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) for the thinking behind the ideas. That theoretical base is explored here in an introductory chapter on relational proximity with its five domains: contact, time, information, power and purpose.

The Relational Manager sets out to be a practical book. It begins with a one-minute relationship assessment test exploring questions of trust, time and practical support in colleagues, family and friends. The opening chapter goes on to introduce a wheel to help readers plot the strength of their relationships. The book ends with a ten-point Relational Rule of Life. As Moses found, reactions to such codes vary.

The heart of the book consists of ten chapters applying relational thinking to different aspects of management. The first looks at relational time management: it includes such less-than-earth-

shattering suggestions as 'send your people home on time' (p.51), though 'buy a better coffee machine' (p.54) sounds more fruitful. The irony of the use of the potentially possessive expression, 'your people', is not explored.

Other chapters cover familiar territory: finance, office culture, systems. But relational pensions and relational travel perhaps come as a surprise. With each subject, the approach is similar. Helpful illustrations from different sectors in different countries – with some lessons from history – illustrate key points. Practical suggestions to implement a relational approach follow. These will resonate differently: 'Get staff to engage with budgets' (p.78) is unlikely to raise many eyebrows, though 'establish an atmosphere where sorry is good' (p.141) might.

There are occasions when the book's self-imposed scope precludes further reflection. The relational wheel includes different family and work relationships, but what of those important encounters with the other? A surprising omission is reference to microfinance, eg Grameen Bank with its extraordinarily high rates of loan repayment. Indeed, the chapter on finance could have included reference to *sharia* banking, where relationships are so important.

This is a book for the general, rather than religious, market place. Thus, the hotel incident with which we started has no reference to entertaining angels unawares. And there is no space to reflect on the Trinity as a model for relationships. The absence of such a Trinitarian perspective is a weakness of the book which most directly addresses this area from a Christian perspective, *Relational Leadership* by Walter C Wright (Paternoster, 2000).

In summary, a useful book to get people to challenge their assumptions, especially in how they relate to one another at work. ■

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