BOOK REVIEW

José Pérez Ríos: Diseño y Diagnóstico de Organizaciones Viables: Un enfoque sistémico

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José Pérez Ríos' "Diseño y Diagnóstico de Organizaciones Viables—Un enfoque sistémico" is most welcome in this turbulent age when so many firms are struggling for their survival. With this book, Pérez Ríos proposes to improve the general knowledge of the Viable System Model (VSM)[1] on the one hand and to provide a guide for its deployment on the other.

What has been lacking is a coherent operationalization of the model, with a methodology for its application. In the wake of the original works of Beer, several significant methodological contributions have emerged that present the model in a more compact way (e.g., Espejo et al. 1996; Türke 2008; Schwaninger 2009). Pérez Ríos' book, however, goes further. It is the first primer which enables both understanding and adequate application in a comprehensive way. The author presents the model at sufficient analytical depth to help the reader attain a familiarity that goes well beyond a shallow acquaintance with Beer's ideas. And he furnishes something which has been hardly available until now: a set of methods and procedures which facilitate model use.

In the first chapter, a concise introduction of Organizational Cybernetics and a detailed description of the VSM are provided. The author builds on the graphic language developed by Beer, and sometimes extended by his followers (see, e.g., Espejo and Harnden 1989). However, he also finds inventive and rich ways of handling graphic representation, e.g., three-dimensionally and in colors, to convey new views on the model. These innovations hopefully will stimulate comprehension and adequate utilization of the VSM.

In Chap. 2, a methodology for a VSM-based diagnosis and design of any organization is presented. Four main stages are distinguished for the process of a respective study, related to identity, vertical and horizontal dimensions of structure, and the coherence of recursion levels. Each of these stages is elaborated thoroughly, with the requisite analytical detailing to orientate a correct deployment of the model.

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[1] The VSM is a powerful conceptual framework for the diagnosis and design of organizations, developed by Stafford Beer (1979, 1981, 1985).

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Chapter 3 comes as a corollary of Chap. 2. It analyzes organizational pathologies by means of the VSM. A wealth of structural, functional as well as information and communication-related pathologies are set forth. The complexity problem in this context is mastered by resort to ideal-types, which are characterized most skillfully and named with catchy terms (e.g., "headless bird", "autopoietic beast"). In this chapter, the link between diagnosis and design is made explicit: A pathology must be elicited so that an effective treatment can be prescribed.

The success of methodologies in the field of management appears to be linked to the availability of "cool" software to support applications. In the past no such device was available for the VSM. In Chap. 4, Pérez Ríos presents VSMod®, a software package which he developed at the University of Valladolid, his academic base. VSMod® has been under testing for several years, and is relatively mature now. As a recent demonstration experienced by this reviewer showed, it is robust, conveniently designed and equipped with convincing features. This software is already being used in different projects, and it promises to be a strong lever for coping with the complexities of organizational studies.

In order to enhance the productive interaction of agents and the coherence of organizations, Stafford Beer developed a protocol called Team Syntegrity (Beer 1994). Aimed at the synergy of teams and inspired by Buckminster Fuller's concept of Tensile Integrity, Beer's intention has become a second pillar of Organizational Cybernetics. It was a good idea for Pérez Ríos to carefully describe the process of Team Syntegrity. Its presentation in Chap. 5 is didactically splendid; it highlights a new design for organizations of the future.

With this outstanding book, José Pérez Ríos has endowed the community of all those interested in organizational studies, and cyberneticians in particular, with a wonderful gift. First, the book is designed to convey a deep knowledge of the VSM. This aim is greatly helped by the crystal-clear argumentation. Second, it is the first complete blueprint that teaches one how to proceed in carrying out a VSM-based diagnosis and design. Finally, its innovative approach to graphic presentation opens new vistas and will probably stimulate more competent applications.

Pérez Ríos' opus makes a timely appearance just now. It offers precisely the essential knowledge and insights which an organizational expert must have in our day. I wish this book the broad dissemination it deserves.

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