Book Review
Organizations... Again!
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There is remarkable continuity as well as a notable evolution in Mintzberg’s work. As with his previous books, *Understanding Organizations*’ central concern is organizational design. While it is written for both scholars and practitioners alike, Mintzberg makes no attempt to overly simplify the complexity of organizations. His expansion of the fundamentals of organizational design challenges readers to think beyond so much of what we might believe about organizations. Arguably, the book’s new and most engaging ideas are corralled into the final chapters and unfortunately not given the space necessary to take flight.

The book’s early sections review much of what Mintzberg has written before on organizational players, their parts, and the building blocks of organizational design, such as coordination mechanisms, structures, and contexts. From the various combinations of these building blocks, Mintzberg presents four fundamental forms of organization: personal, programmed, professional, and project. He sets out the “ideal types” of these forms: the personal enterprise (“focused on the person in charge”); the programmed machine (“everything conceivable is programmed”); the professional assembly (“where the skills and knowledge of the operating workers” structure the organization); and the project pioneer (defined as “intrapreneurial experts who collaborate to create novel outputs”).

These forms are slightly tweaked versions of those discussed in his earlier publications. What distinguishes *Understanding Organizations* from its predecessors is Mintzberg’s consideration of the salient forces that shape organizations and what they do. “For every form there is a prevalent force,” Mintzberg asserts: the four forces of “consolidation in the personal organization and collaboration in the project organization, efficiency in the machine organization and proficiency in the professional organization.” He offers three more “catalytic” forces that intersect with the existing four forces and can affect all four forms: “the infusion of culture … tightens up the structure, by encouraging people to pull together”; while “the overlay of separation [pushes] the units away from each other, and the intrusion of conflict … pulls people and units apart from each other.”

Three more forms emerge from his analysis of the collective seven forces. The divisional form is an organization dominated by autonomy, the community ship is dominated by community, and the political arena is dominated by conflict. While an organization could acquire an “anchored,” or pure, form, Mintzberg rightly notes that it is more realistic for it to take shape as a hybrid, in which “two or more forces logically coexist in some kind of dynamic balance.”

Forms. Forces. And more forms. Typologies of organizations like Mintzberg’s are inherently limited because they connote universality when clearly they are molds of subjective interpretation. So, what are the new, critical takeaways from this doyen of organization and management studies?

The first is that organizations are different and that their differences evolve over time—a lesson that both practitioners and academics must take seriously. Particularly the latter, Mintzberg contends, as the typical MBA education pushes monolithic thinking—an observation underlying his 2004 book, *Managers Not MBAs*. He believes, rather, that management is a practice that cannot be learned in the classroom but can only be acquired on the job, through apprenticeship, mentorship, and direct experience. Many MBAs, particularly from the more prestigious schools, go into management consulting with elite firms, each of which has its own “formula” for advising organizations. Mintzberg begins *Understanding Organizations* by taking aim at that reductive MBA pedagogy: “Believing there is one best way to structure organizations is the worst way to manage them,” he argues. We need to be wary of “one size fits all” organizational solutions.

The second takeaway is that not only do organizations have different purposes and operate in different contexts, but also they change in different ways, depending on the set of internal and external forces idiosyncratic to an organization. Therefore, the process of organizational change must account for, Mintzberg writes, “the uniqueness of the particular organization and [then] design change with that in mind.” Consequently, management techniques developed to make the production of automobiles more efficient, for example, don’t necessarily translate well to universities. “Perhaps nothing has broken the spirit of our professional services—in schools especially—more
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Mintzberg writes. Likewise, change in a personal-enterprise organization—centered on an individual— will unfold differently from change in a programmed-machine organization, with its well-defined structures and systems. This should be obvious but isn’t always when, for instance, we hear the common refrain that the US government should be run like a business. Mintzberg is particularly passionate about this topic. “It is especially this proposition that I wish to contest,” he argued in a 1996 Harvard Business Review article. “I am not a mere customer of my government, thank you. … If we are to manage government properly, then we must learn to govern management.”

The third takeaway is that all organizations are on some level hybrids, containing a variety of forces that require, as Mintzberg says, a “dynamic balance” for the organization to function effectively. The university is a perfect—or, perhaps, perfectly imperfect—example. Its professional core operates through the standardized skills and knowledge that define their “professional” roles as scholars and gives them autonomy within that organization. A team of university researchers could even look like a project-pioneer organization because of the focus on innovation. In contrast, a university’s support staff—including human resources, standardization and formalization of actions, there is still room for some level of variation—which some may attribute to humanity, or an organization’s human parts. So, while the aim of defined organizational structures and processes is to produce unified control, unit cultures, unit logics, and unit tasks within an organization often do not fit easily with each other and may be contradictory. Organizational management is the management of this contradiction. And Mintzberg emphasizes this critical connection between organizations and management: “The effectiveness of any organization depends on the management of contradiction.”

The fourth takeaway is that all organizations are emergent. Their structures are not fixed or immutable but can and usually do—if they are to remain functional—experience “occasional bursts of change,” Mintzberg writes. The idea of emergence reflects the potential instability of dealing with contradictions inherent in organizations. While it is important to understand organizations as types, managers must take internal complexities into consideration when thinking about how to implement organizational change. As Mintzberg writes, “there is no magic formula for grouping positions and units, just a number of options that trade off one set of advantages for another.”

Overall, Understanding Organizations offers much wisdom, but the ideas of emergence and hybridity require more analysis. Yet emergence is critical to an organization’s life; an organization must remain flexible and adaptable to remain functional. Even in the most programmed of organizations there are circumstances that arise that are not covered by existing policies, rules, regulations, and processes. Emergent, structural changes demand, Mintzberg writes, correlative “emergent strategies” to reflect and manage those changes. He does not describe how each organizational form adapts to emergence but does suggest which form, by definition, is better capable of handling emergence—e.g., the project pioneer is defined by its exploratory, innovative nature, making emergence a constitutive force of this organizational form.

Mintzberg believes, and I agree with him, that much of the advice we get about how to manage and change organizations does not properly recognize the critical differences between organizations, which is why he begins with organizational types. But these differences do not mean that ideas, practices, and techniques can’t be transferred between them. They do mean, however, that managers must account for these differences to ensure that such transfers are effective, which necessitates that managers have a deep knowledge of not only their own organization but the organization from which they are transferring knowledge. Again, governments are not businesses, and universities are not automobile manufacturers. The resounding message for managers is to become cognizant of structural differences before making any change.

Overall, Understanding Organizations offers much wisdom. However, the powerful ideas of emergence and hybridity require more thinking and analysis than Mintzberg affords them. Placed at the end of the book, they feel like addenda rather than deep considerations fully integrated into his organizational typology. To this, Mintzberg’s analysis could have benefited from engagement with more recent scholarship on these ideas.

So, has Mintzberg finally figured out how organizations work?

In his closing sentences, Mintzberg expresses hope that the book has helped readers “liberate [themselves] from the orthodoxies of organizing, so that [they] can design better organizations in the future.” But, he cautions, “please keep in mind these wise words from Alfred North Whitehead, ‘seek simplicity and distrust it’ … finally!”

It is a lesson that is also perhaps a confession—as well as an indication that we can expect more from Mintzberg on organizations in the future.

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