

Decades Later, Townsend's Leadership Views Still Genius

By Dale Dauten

Recently I came across some passages from Robert Townsend's brilliant book from 1970, *Up the Organization*, and I decided I should try to interview him. I asked dauntless researcher Connie Denk to find him, and she eventually called to say, "he's been dead for six years."

Thus thwarted, the best I could do was listen to cassette tapes of him talking about leadership with Warren Bennis. The tapes are titled *Reinventing Leadership* but should have been called *A Couple of Geniuses Sitting Around Talking*.

Townsend's opening premise about leadership is that businesses, especially failing ones, are over-managed and under-led. He and Bennis eventually present the now-familiar portrait of the enlightened leader: competent and driven, self-effacing and chipper, oozing integrity and values - in other words, a JFK without the slippery slope ... which would be, come to think of it, a Ronald Reagan. I'm not sure how many executives live up to that version of leadership, but I know that most see the portrait and think it's a mirror.

However, into the butter of sweet leadership Townsend jumps with a verbal picture of the Old Model of Leadership, featuring an executive who, in effect, makes the pronouncement to the organization's employees: *"I order all you insignificant little people to come to work excited, energetic, and creative, and to accomplish inconceivable things, so that I may become rich and famous and live a luxurious life, traveling around the world, building a home on the Riviera, and playing with other important people like myself. By the way, I want you to park in the outer lot and slough through the snow past the empty parking space with my name on it, and I also want you to pay for coffee while I get mine free, in fine china."*

He gives us that vivid image - who in corporate life can't mentally walk across that parking lot? - then, bango, jumps in with gleeful honesty, saying, *"And it worked!"* Thank you, Robert Townsend, for stating the obvious: that the bashed and abused old command-and-control model, with its ladders and hierarchy, *worked* ... and still does. We don't want to admit to its grim efficiency, but there's a reason that the hierarchical, bureaucratic management system is at the basis of virtually all armies, governments, corporations, churches, and schools.

In fact, one reason it works so well is that an elaborate bureaucracy eliminates the need for charisma, reduces the demands upon competence, and replaces individual integrity with systematic regulation. Said another way, bureaucracy is leadership that doesn't rely upon an actual leader; the system is the Reagan.

By acknowledging the slow, beastly power of the Old Model of Leadership, Townsend understands that recruiting people to the Enlightened Model is not a matter for argument. Rather, it is a guerrilla battle against not just tradition or inertia, but against human nature. As one genetics researcher has put it, "Hierarchy is forever." The Enlightened Model doesn't seek to eliminate hierarchy, just to lubricate it, reducing friction against the best in our natures.

Those who seek to liberate the workplace should not expect to be greeted with parades and flowers, any more than coalition forces should have expected to be greeted that way in the streets of Baghdad. On the high road, too, there are potholes.

Source: Dale Dauten's weekly newspaper column courtesy of King Features Syndicate