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Review of “The Limits of Organizational Change,” By Herbert Kaufman

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read them.³⁷ Somebody at Harper & Row really should have done something about this; Professor Briloff can do better, as his *Barron's* articles show.

ALAN GUNN*

THE LIMITS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE. By Herbert Kaufman. University: University of Alabama Press, 1971. Pp. 124. \$5.75.

*I should be sorry that any opinion of mine should shake the authority of an established precedent; since it is better for the subject that even faulty precedents should not be shaken than that the law should be uncertain.*¹

Change, restructuring, and reform always seem to come too slowly, meeting obstacles created by an institutional environment. *The Limits of Organizational Change* contains a study of some of the factors which inhibit change in an organization. A business organization has incentives for self-study which are quite different from those of law schools, judicial systems, bar associations, and other organizations which do not have monetary profits as a goal. Organizations which can retain independence from money-making pressures may study their own operations as a means of substantiating budget requests or as an aid to the efficient use of allotted funds. But administrators in organizations which are not profit-oriented cannot feel the pressure for self-study and innovation felt by those in an organization where success and even survival are determined largely by amounts of money saved or earned. Profit-oriented organizations have been forced to investigate patterns of behavior, both internally and in the groups of people with whom the organizations have contact.

Such study has led to a substantial body of "business literature," which is so categorized only because it has been an outgrowth of business development. Principles of the social sciences may be used to

37. *Id.* at 2-3.

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real advantage by organizations which operate with different goals and which operate in a much different environment from the type of organization which previously has made the greatest use of these tools. Thus, *The Limits of Organizational Change* is a text on law school administration and development, on judicial systems, and on behavior within government organizations. The organizational principles in the book apply not only to business organizations but to most organizations, regardless of their goals or incentives.

An appendix to the book provides Kaufman's ideas on the death of organizations. The survival of an organization depends largely upon its ability to cope with its environment; an organization needs to change in response to environmental change. Failure to change causes the organization to become ineffective and, in many cases, to die. As in biological death, it may be difficult to establish a precise time when organizational death occurs. Although biological organisms appear to be subject to more inescapable constraints than organizations, organizations seem to die at a greater rate because they do not adjust to a changing environment.

Kaufman cites three reasons for the failure of necessary organizational change in response to changing situations. First, people in organizations crave the security of a stable environment; changes do not take place for fear that reasonably secure positions will be replaced by something unknown. Secondly, those in positions of authority in the organization may oppose change because they derive substantial benefit under the status quo. Finally, organizations may simply be unable to change.

Established trends in organizational development may preclude development in another direction. Lack of resources may inhibit change. Agreements with other organizations or legal sanctions may prevent change. These social and physical barriers to change are described in the initial chapter and supply a basis for the development of the remainder of the book. I found it an interesting exercise to apply statements from this chapter to well-remembered deliberative sessions of organizations in which I have participated. Retrospective examinations of meetings of bar associations, university faculties, and judicial conferences, for example, provided excellent illustrations of Kaufman's explanation of resistance to change.

Whatever type of organization is examined, it is clear that some survive in spite of all these lethal factors. The second of the book's four

chapters might well be entitled, "How Organizational Change is Promoted." It mentions a number of ways in which the three major obstacles to change are neutralized or circumvented, allowing change and flexibility in an organization. Many of Kaufman's observations, while meant to apply to organizations generally, are precise enough to make one feel that Kaufman is describing a very familiar and specific development in whatever organization one chooses to analyze. For example, he states:

Occasionally, when the advocates of change discern that an informal group or liaison stands in their way, they may try to neutralize it by co-opting its most active members into their own camp. By and large, though, the informal system is shadowy and elusive, and reorganization is an appealing way of dealing with it because a reorganization can upset the informal system without explicitly identifying it.²

This chapter mentions methods of change which Kaufman terms either "voluntary" or "involuntary." Involuntary changes are those unavoidable changes in attitude which come with turnover in personnel. Conscious or voluntary changes may come from the intentional recruitment of innovators or from adding people to the organization with different professional, geographic, educational, and social perspectives. A climate of change may be developed by adding new blood at all levels of the organization. The removal of social and physical barriers to change and the acquisition of new resources tend to pave the way for change. But the creation of a better climate for change provides no assurance that forthcoming changes will be the ones desired.

The third chapter answers the question presented by the first: If the factors which inhibit change can be surmounted, why do organizations die for failure to change? It is not difficult to recall a situation in which organizational change was followed by inactivity, in which what started as an important change became almost inconsequential. This basic difficulty in making significant changes, according to Kaufman, is explained by two reactions to change. First, once a change begins it starts to freeze the organization into a new pattern. Secondly, other forces begin to limit the extent and speed of change. Many actions taken to promote change cause rigidity once the change has begun. The development of new parts of a system causes develop-

2. H. KAUFMAN, *THE LIMITS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE* 55 (1971).

ment of subsystems which, because they are smaller, are not flexible. Decentralization, then, usually does not result in greater flexibility because local operations become more rigid and self-supporting. Rigidity is further sustained by those devices which were originally intended to facilitate change; they develop fixed patterns as they exert their power.

Aversions to unpredictability can reinforce rigidity in a changing organization. Changes are sources of unpredictability, and it is the nature of people to try to contain these changes. In our legal system, for example, it is quite comfortable to rely upon the precedent established in previous cases because this provides desirable certainty. Even in the wake of reform-oriented decisions which appear to be radical departures from established precedent, we generally see numerous cases which tend to limit the change.

Kaufman wraps up his package with his own theories, applying them primarily to larger organizations but totally excluding none. To cope with a changing environment, an organization needs the flexibility to change. If the rate of change in the environment is too rapid, the organization cannot change quickly enough and will fail.

An examination of factors which give organizations flexibility seems to emphasize the importance of size. The absorption of threatening or adjoining organizations leads to flexibility, as does the combination of two primary organizations. The flexibility provided by size comes from the variety of resources available to a larger organization and the ability of a larger organization to survive large setbacks. There is a general tendency, according to Kaufman, toward bigger organizations. He predicts that there will be no return to a world of simpler, smaller units.

The book is not a guidebook for the changing of institutions. The study of organizational behavior has passed the point where its proponents believe they can devise a set of rules for instant success. Kaufman's observations are more useful in encouraging retrospective analysis of the actions of an organization than in guiding administrators in the shaping of policy. The book may provoke examination of the barriers to change, and in doing so may help one to develop attitudes more conducive to the survival of an organization. This book is a rather painless way for an attorney, judge, or law teacher to ease into real interdisciplinary study. It is not a deep, scholarly book; it is brief,

quite readable, and adequately precise. An evening spent with this book can be a highly productive use of the short time it takes to read it.

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