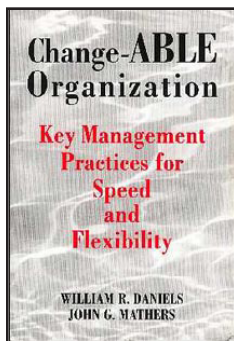


# Book Reviews for Managers

## Change-ABLE Organization

### Key Management Practices for Speed and Flexibility

by William R. Daniels & John G. Mathers



Harvard Business  
School Press, 2002  
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*"Their vessel of choice is  
the sea-going canoe. ...all the  
paddlers face forward"*

#### REVIEWED BY IAN COOK

Some organizations are like a big, hulking raft. They move slowly, deliberately, carry a lot of freight, and are difficult to turn. And what a bore to be crew on one of these vessels! Other organizations are more like a galley. Remember those movies about ancient Rome? Galleys are large, mobile, and also carry a fair amount of cargo. But the crew faces the stern, rowing in unison to the beat of the drum of one man—the only person who can see where they're going and how they are doing getting there.

Daniels and Mathers show how to make your organization "Change-ABLE." Their vessel of choice is the *sea-going canoe*. In this boat all the paddlers face forward. They know the destination (goal), communicate frequently with fellow crew members, and can observe first-hand the progress and adjust their own performance accordingly.

So much—probably too much—has been written about teams and building a "teambased culture." Most of it is theoretical and too much of it deals with team process—how to get people to function as a "team." Most of this literature avoids the critical issue of team performance. A team is at best a very loose working group unless its members share a true commitment to the group's goals. Furthermore, the larger organization must reward members for the achievement of group performance objectives, not just for their individual performance accomplishments. This book offers the best presentation I have yet to come across for how to develop a truly team-based, flexible, high performance organization. The secret lies in adopting what they call the five "key management practices." These are:

## 5 Key Management Practices



1. **Linked Teams.** Each group of managers and most individual contributors reporting to a leader constitutes a team. The leader's "Performance Plan" (objectives) become, by definition, the goals of the team. Most of these managers are also leaders of their own team. Each person receives his or her bonus based on the success of the team of which he or she is a member, not the team he/she leads! This way each member of a team accepts accountability for the full team's decisions, functioning, and accomplishments.
2. **Performance Plans (PP).** A PP is a statement of the key results that a manager (i.e., team leader) has committed to achieve over the year. Your PP should comprise no more than seven result areas, each with a % attached reflecting its relative importance in your overall PP. Say the authors, if you can't put your PP on a single page or recite it from memory, it is too complicated to serve as a focus for your team's efforts. The PPs of each of your team members together support your PP (which supports part of your manager's PP, and so on).

3. **Work Reviews.** These form the main business of a team when it meets, which should be often-at least every week or two. These are results-oriented get-togethers, not information sharing, as all too many meetings are these days. The leader reports progress towards the team's objectives and members report on their own PPs. Update presentations take under four minutes per member, with data presented graphically. The member presents the current status (on-track, behind, at risk, completed) of each result area, obstacles/issues/problems to be addressed, and what he or she needs right now from team colleagues.
4. **Group Decision-Making.** Meetings are about decisions as to how resources are to be deployed. Group decisions may be "consultative," where members forcefully present their points-of-view to the leader who makes the final decision for the team. Or, they may be by "consensus." Members are by no means obligated or expected to agree. What they are expected to do is understand one another's position. Also, they are expected to come to a resolution/course of action. If they do not agree with the team's resolution, they are expected to disagree and commit! One is reminded here of the principle of "cabinet solidarity" that is a cornerstone of the parliamentary system of government. Interestingly, and of vital importance for the Change-ABLE organization, members are not expected necessarily to express enthusiasm about a team decision-if asked, they may share their reservations.
5. **Breakthrough Systems.** This is where the linked team approach meets the contribution of Individual Contributors. Employees need three things to

do their job well: (a) knowing what results are expected from them, (b) a capacity to self-monitor, on a continuing basis, how they are doing and (c) control over resources sufficient to meet the expectations. Teams support their Individual Contributor members by ensuring all three of these items are present.

This book suggests ways to make your organization Change-ABLE. You do this by implementing the above five Key Management Practices. Ideally you start at the top, with the senior team, but beginning in the middle of your structure can work too. A good first step is to analyse all the meetings your own team holds, why they happen and who attends. Make sure that from now on they deal almost exclusively with decisions/recommendations pertaining to the team's (i.e., your own) key result areas and team members' PPs that support the team's deliverables.

I like Change-ABLE Organization because it *lays out concretely how to accomplish three aspects of the modern, flexible, results-driven organization.*

- Moving decisions downward and outward from the executive core
- Aligning the efforts of decentralized units in a common direction
- Building a culture of collaboration and teamwork and shared accountability for group goals

The research on high performance organizations for today and the future tells us this is clearly the way to go. Daniels and Mathers show us how to make it happen. While they insist you must implement all five key management practices, I think there is a lot for today's progressive manager who doesn't necessarily want to go "the whole nine yards."

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