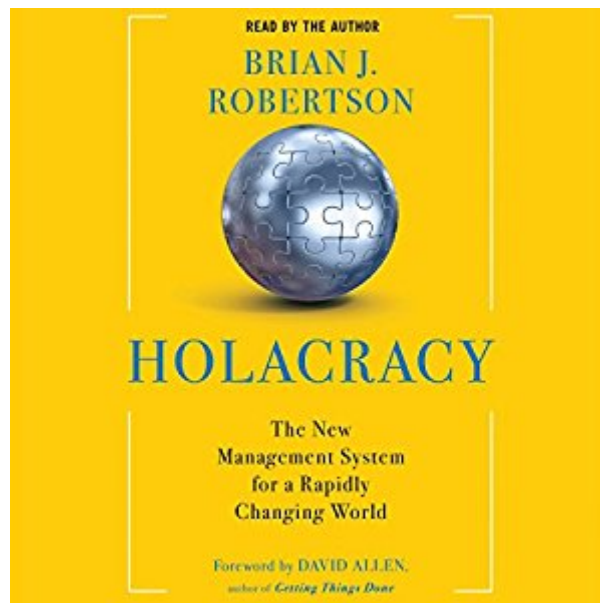




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Holacracy: The New Management System For A Rapidly Changing World



Synopsis

Holacracy distributes authority and decision making throughout an organization and defines people not by hierarchy and titles but by roles. Holacracy creates organizations that are fast and agile and that succeed by pursuing their purpose, free from the tyranny of top-down planning that's instantly out of date. This isn't anarchy - it's quite the opposite. When you start to follow Holacracy, you learn to create new structures and ways of making decisions that empower the people who know the most about the work your company does: your frontline colleagues. Some of the many champions of Holacracy include Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos.com (and author of the number one New York Times best seller *Delivering Happiness*); Evan Williams (cofounder of Blogger, Twitter, and Medium); and David Allen.

Book Information

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Management Science

Customer Reviews

I came into this via *Reinventing Organizations*. Though I had heard of Holacracy a bit before, I had never looked into it in much detail. I am predisposed to like this kind of book. I am a manager-of-managers in a high-tech company and I often feel like "there must be a better way". I came away fundamentally unsatisfied. This feels like a Cliff Notes version of Holacracy rather than something that would convince me to try it out in my company. The author (eventually) makes a good case for the governance meetings, though I feel like the explanation was spread out across multiple chapters. For instance it isn't until Chapter 10 (a chapter ostensibly about how to adopt Holacracy piece-meal if wholesale adoption is impossible) the author explains "change your

language, change your culture" and why the terms "tension" and "tension processing" were chosen. I feel like this discussion should have been up in Chapter 4 when the governance meetings were introduced. I think in general the book does a good job of explaining the "what" of Holacracy but is pretty hit-or-miss when it comes to explaining the "why". Another example is the repeated claim that you "can't adopt only parts of Holacracy". This includes a rigid formula for meetings that includes a closing round where you go around the room and "give each person space to share a closing reflection about the meeting". I'm not saying that's a bad idea but I don't understand why that is integral to Holacracy. If I leave out that one part do I really lose all the benefit of Holacracy? I guess I'm just skeptical of that. But the biggest failing of the book is that it is just too light on implementation details. This comes out in two main areas: role definition and the "apps" that are suddenly introduced at the end of the book. For the role definitions, Holacracy seems to rely in an almost legalistically complete role definition. Since Holacracy has been rolled out in many companies, I'm not saying it is impossible to do. But that book doesn't really give any real world examples of how this role clarification works in large and messy teams. How many people really know all the roles they fill and what the scope of all those roles are? How do you realistically make that switch? I'd have loved to see that detail. What about jobs where you seem to have a lot of people who are somewhat interchangeable? How does that work. For instance, imagine a software team with 15 developers working in a normal scrum-kind-of-way where you take stories from the top of the backlog. What does the role definition look like for them? What is the scope of their autonomy? I'm sure there are answers but the book doesn't provide any, instead relying on contrived examples in a company that appears to have about 5 employees. But my single biggest complaint is when you get to Chapter 8 and a subsection introduces "apps". By that point I was skeptical on some details, didn't fully buy in, but felt it had some good and interesting ideas. But I had these nagging questions at the back of my mind and was wondering when the book would get around to providing some answers. "How do you set salary? How do you give raises? How do you give promotions? How do you make hiring and firing decisions? How do you decide to shutdown an entire office and lay off 150 people? How do you decide to IPO or accept a buyout? How do you set budgets and enforce them?" The book's answer is.... "You could design your own system, given your specific needs, but you may find it useful to check out [the HolacracyOne] 'app store'." No link or URL is provided. It is hard to get excited about designing from scratch my own systems for these things (I don't expect a perfectly formed solution that requires no tweaking but starting with a totally blank canvas?) and I'm also not excited that the answer is to go read a web page. I bought this book for a reason, hoping it would make a compelling argument. (FWIW, there is exactly one "app" on the "app

store" for compensation. It sounds interesting but it also sounds similar to the compensation system a startup called hanno.co blogged about using...and then nine months later blogged about moving away from. So I'm not exactly sold on it as a great option.)

If you live in Las Vegas, check! Have an interest in management and business issues, check! And know a number of people in the Downtown / Zappos / entrepreneur community, check! Then you can't help but have heard of Holacracy. Normally the tones of conversations about Holacracy, and in particular of Zappos, are "embrace it or leave" or "offer to their staff, mix wonder and an unbelieving shake of the head normally reserved for parents of teenagers. This new book by Brian J. Robertson aims to change all that. The funny thing is that it actually does a pretty good job. The first real hint that there is more here than just a new business book, is in that the author has been involved in Lean software development and it is almost a throwaway comment- which is unfortunate. Lean is becoming a highly respected way of changing how companies work (please see my review of Lean Hospitals for a better explanation) and there are some interesting commonalities that someone, better versed in both than myself, needs to explore. At its core, Holacracy is the deconstruction of work into roles, accountabilities, domains, and polices and giving employees the freedom, and the structure, to make modifications when "tensions" arise without the formal structure of supervisors and management. Interestingly, a lot of the housekeeping of Holacracy is in preserving the integrity of the process rather than the comfort of the employees. "It is difficult to hide from empowerment when the organizational process around you continually shines a light on your hiding place. Of course, if you are looking for things to turn you off such as parody worthy jargon; "In Tactical Meetings circle members use a fast-paced forum to deal with their ongoing operations, synchronize team members, and triage any difficulties that are preventing progress." then you will find it. However, it is worth embracing one of the key conceits of the author when describing the adoption or even understanding of a system such as Holacracy: The rules of any game fade into the background when everyone knows what they are doing and how they should do it. It is only when someone breaks the rules, or does not know them well enough, that the rules come into sharp relief. For those of us who are constantly looking to upgrade our management tool box, there is a lot you will recognize from other areas and other ideas what are worth re-purposing if a complete adoption of Holacracy is never even on your mind. The structured checkins at the beginning of meetings, for example, I am already planning on adopting

along with the book's strategy definition. Of course, a book of this length (it is a short 200 pages that I read in a morning) can be nothing more than a appetizer or introduction to the world of Holacracy. I would have liked to have seen a few more diagrams and a decent FAQ section: The idea that the CEO of a company unadopt Holacracy at any time but is not above the rules is great to know; but would have been nicer to hear on page 10 rather than page 152! My main criticism of the book, however, is in the field of Human Resources. What does the disciplinary process look like in a Holacracy? What does termination look like? How does that jive with legal and privacy issues? There is mention of compensation models, but these are brief and experimental at best. There is something really interesting going on here with Holacracy and it deserves a more positive press that it currently seems to be receiving; hopefully this book will help change that. But it is not a panacea at least not yet. But it is worth your time to find out why!

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