

# Gods of Management

-by Charles Handy

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## Title & Author:

Gods of Management by Charles Handy

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## Introduction

### Why did you choose this book?

The book titled *Gods of Management* was selected for this review on the basis of being described as "a classic for getting a read on any workplace culture" (Mind Tools, 2019).

### What were your initial expectations?

I myself being a curious sort who enjoy asking why organisations succeed or fail, so was interested to discover how Handy would break down leadership styles with his detached theorizing. I was surprised at his strategy of Greek gods linking gods with concept. Once launched, I got a bit nervous it would turn too mythological and lose relevance, but I weighed that it might be memorable for all those abstract concepts. To my surprise it did, but also gave an anthropomorphizing factor to the concepts.

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## Summary

### Provide a brief overview of the plot.

Handy's text, entitled *The Gods of Management*, reconciles four possible organizational types with the implied tone of an etymological association with a Greek god:

**Zeus:** The charismatic club culture leader

**Apollo:** The rule-bound role culture

**Athena:** The teamwork-based task culture

**Dionysus:** The autonomous, existential culture

## **Mention the main characters and central themes.**

Handy uses an example and makes observations to arrive at the conclusion that no culture can ever be ideal - there will always be the positive and the negative in any company. For example, those companies with Zeus' dynamic, personality-driven style will fall apart when there is no leader; however, those companies in the Apollo type will stifle creativity through rigid rules.

## **Avoid spoilers keep it intriguing!**

This text flows in no particular order but instead, attempts to engage the reader in a diagnostic assessment of their own organization. Without being exhaustive in content, Handy will revisit themes of flexibility, separation of structure and autonomy, and the demand for culture to serve the utilizes. Handy suggests no bottom-line solutions, but instead urges leaders to "read the room" and to act accordingly.

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## **Analysis & Opinion**

### **What worked well in the book? What didn't?**

Handy has an extraordinary ability to capture complex ideas, such as rendering cultures into gods while simultaneously having an example of nebulous abstractions become a story.

### **Did any character stand out? Why?**

I found the Dionysus chapter utterly fascinating, especially the section on modern workplaces that revolve around autonomy, "*What can the organization do for me? The existentialist asks the question—not the other way around,*" to which Handy sarcastically adds there is an answer.

### **Discuss any important message or lesson the book conveys.**

It resonates particularly in the context of the modern gig economy, which is being significantly driven by this particular level of narcissism that seems to surround our society. The Apollo chapter simply didn't fit and feel like it belonged, especially after the consideration of the vivid descriptions of the 1980s that depict the era of "reading papers, you know, extreme hierarchies." The bureaucracies of the present do not organize, nor do they hold the same weight in the context of our technologically unformed hybrid terrain as they did.

### **Direct speech:**

*"What can the organization do for me?"*

*"The existentialist asks the question not the other way around."*

### **Indirect speech:**

*Handy sarcastically adds there is an answer.*

### **General impression:**

I liked Handy's objectivity; he does not ruin any god but decries the compliance of worshipping any god blindly. He notes that Athena's results-driven teams are brilliant concerning innovation but burn out quickly as there are no boundaries about work. The implicit lesson? *balance*. However, the lack of explicit models on how to combine cultures left me disappointed Handy is a diagnostic, not a prescriber.

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## **Personal Connection**

### **How did the book impact you?**

Reading this book was a "breath of fresh air" to my cynical view of life in a company. I had "looked down" on stern office rules, but Handy made me believe that "Apollo-like" systems also have a use they are "predictable" which "keeps the ship afloat" in a sea of chaos.

### **Did it change your perspective on anything?**

I was reminded of this when I read his chapter on Zeus cultures, and it took me back to a start-up company I worked at where the day was controlled by the moods of the CEO. We flew high until we crashed hard proof that charm and good intentions are not enough.

### **Use two idioms and two phrasal verbs naturally in this section.**

And now I *take with a grain of salt* the idea of having one culture and only one. The book made me *poke around* my current office to *map out* my colleagues to these "gods." Spoiler alert: we are a *messy blend* of Athena and Dionysus cultures. It has been interesting to see why some projects thrive (collaboration!) and some fail (too much ego). Handy made me not only question how I think about offices he made me question how I participated in them.

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## Conclusion

### **Would you recommend this book? Why or why not?**

I would strongly advocate for *Gods of Management* not just for managers, for anyone who works or participates in office politics.

### **Who would enjoy it the most?**

It can't hurt if you are bored of recycled leadership advice. Handy's metaphors are memorable, so at a minimum, they provide a lens to read office politics, or team wars. New managers, HR folks, or employees who are indignantly disgruntled would find value. Keep in mind, no one should go into this book expecting a straight-line solution. The text provides a mirror, not a map.