

Book Reviews

The End of Average: How to Succeed in a World That Values Sameness. 2012. Todd Rose. London, England: Penguin. 256 pages.

There is no such thing as an average person. When an organization designs and builds social systems to meet the needs of the “average” member, they are actually designing them for no one, resulting in predictable problems and dissatisfaction. These are the core premises of Todd Rose’s book, *The End of Average: How to Succeed in a World That Values Sameness*. In a very accessible, deeply personal, and unpretentious way, Rose presents data that undermine more than a century of thinking on how to study, organize, manage, and educate people. He articulates three principles upon which to usher in the “Age of Individuals”: the jaggedness principle, the context principle, and the pathways principle. In the last section he describes how one might apply these principles in business and educational contexts.

The *jaggedness principle* says that for any sufficiently interesting characteristic of human beings—intelligence or personality, for example—the subcomponents of this characteristic tend to have little or no correlation to one another, creating a “jagged” profile of subcomponents. Any

attempt to combine the subcomponents into a composite measure, such as IQ or personality type, will be hopelessly uninterpretable. Furthermore, the *context principle* establishes that even these subcomponent measures are likely to change in various situations. One might be very introverted in a meeting with his or her boss, but not with his or her coworkers. This dependence on context makes measuring people extremely difficult. However, even if one could measure and classify people reliably, the *pathways principle* demonstrates that there are many (perhaps infinite) ways to achieve a performance goal. Any management or education strategy that constrains individuals’ ability to discover for themselves how best to reach or satisfy a goal is doomed to be suboptimal.

This is an important book because of how clearly it articulates something most people have known or sensed for a long time: that individuals matter and there is no shortcut to high-quality management or learning that allows one to ignore idiosyncrasy. Grounded in decades of research, this book will be a source of concrete wisdom and guidance for anyone who has a role in determining or deploying performance management systems.

Reviewed by
Dr. Morgan C. Benton

Breaking the Fear Barrier. 2011. Tom Rieger. New York, NY: Gallup Press. 151 pages.

In his seminal work, *Out of the Crisis*, W. Edwards Deming lists his “14 Points to Transform Management.” The 14 Points can be grouped according to theme, and points 8, 9, and 10 all address fear in one form or another. Point 8, drive out fear, emphasizes avoiding blame by finding the true cause of a problem. Point 9 is break down barriers between staff areas, and point 10 encourages managers to eliminate slogans, exhortations, and targets for work.

This book addresses reducing fear as it specifically relates to Deming’s point 9. Author Rieger, a longtime consultant with Gallup, points out in this book that in most cases organizational fear often paralyzes companies from taking the next step toward success. He describes organizational fear in three ways: parochialism, territorialism, and empire building. Parochialism is the focus on excellence inside the unit at the expense of everything else. Territorialism involves the selfish aim to control everything inside the organization. Empire building is the accumulation of resources as a badge of excellence. All three lead to an organization with a bureaucratic mindset.

Once the fears are identified, Rieger takes readers on a journey breaking down each of these fears. Using a scenario construct, he amplifies the fear in an organizational context and then shows how to break down that fear. The author also includes examples taken from his consulting work. Finally, he offers ideas for preventing the fears from occurring and designing guidelines to build an ideal organization free of fear. At 151 pages, this book is small but clearly organized, and it provides numerous good examples that readers can apply to their own work scenarios.

Reviewed by
Scott Rutherford

Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future. 2014. Peter Thiel (with Blake Masters). New York, NY: Random House. 211 pages.

Peter Thiel is a consummate entrepreneur: He co-founded PayPal and Palatir, and invested in SpaceX, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Although one might expect that his

most recent book provides advice to help managers become successful innovators, this gem provides a counterintuitive blueprint for continuous improvement and aligning everyone in an organization toward achieving strategic goals. Because Thiel defines a startup as “the largest group of people you can convince of a plan to build a different future,” his book is broadly applicable to any leader who needs to leverage the skills and capabilities of individuals and teams.

Thiel’s advice is simple: Avoid competition at all costs. He does not advocate disruptive innovation, but instead encourages managers and leaders to answer one question: “What important truth do very few people agree with you on?” By using this answer to focus an organization’s activities, he claims, one can avoid following the template that most organizations adhere to: Make incremental advances, stay lean and flexible, improve on the competition, and focus on product over sales. Instead, he says one should recognize the

opposite principles: 1) it is better to risk boldness than triviality; 2) a bad plan is better than no plan; 3) competitive markets destroy profits; and 4) sales is just as important as product quality.

Quality managers who read this book will be challenged to form new perspectives on old assumptions, and for this purpose alone, Thiel’s book is highly recommended. For example, on the first page he asserts that “today’s best practices lead to dead ends; the best paths are new and untried.” How can quality-minded professionals lead organizations that leverage the finest aspects of tried-and-true techniques like best practices while avoiding the innovator’s dilemma? Examples from several companies that Thiel has worked with are used to support each point that he makes. This is an easy (yet potentially profound) read that will challenge aspects of strategy and operations management that quality managers may take for granted.

Reviewed by
Dr. Nicole Radziwill