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## Thoroughly Modern – Mary Parker Follett

*Over half a century ago Mary Parker Follett wrote books on management that are as relevant today as they were then*

*"I believe we shall soon think of the leader as one who can organize the experience of the group . . . It is by organizing experience that we transform experience into power . . . the task of the chief executive is to articulate the purpose which guides the integrated unity which his business aims to be . . . The ablest administrators do not merely draw logical conclusions from the array of facts of the past which their expert assistants bring to them; they have a vision of the future."*

The quote could be from a speech by Tom Peters or a sampling from the recent torrent of writings on charismatic leadership. But it is not from either of these sources; it is from a lecture given in 1927 by Mary Parker Follett, who lived from 1868 to 1933.

Born in Boston, Follett trained as a political scientist but became involved in education, vocational guidance and ultimately in writing and lecturing about management. Although she came to this latter activity when she was in her fifties and her output was small, she was one of the most influential of the early writers on management. Both Chester Barnard and Peter Drucker picked up and elaborated upon her ideas, for Follett's unique blend of practical advice and theoretical sophistication made her one of the most perceptive observers of managers and their organizations.

Her own writings, however, are little read today. She had the misfortune to publish them during a time when America was preoccupied with the concepts of Scientific Management in the pursuit of efficiency. Follett's concerns with creativity, social processes and leadership attracted only a limited audience in both England and America. It is, however, her perspective on these topics that makes her writings so relevant to us today.

### **Theory and Practice Jostle for Supremacy**

During the 1980s and 1990s there has been a significant change in the sources of the advice being offered to managers by writers of books on

management. In the continual struggle for supremacy between theory and practice as a guide to behavior, practice now seems to be firmly in control. This contrasts with the 30-year period after World War II when theory seemed to be dominant. During that time the frameworks of strategic planning, management by objectives, portfolio theory and a variety of management "principles" were continually being invoked to prescribe what managers ought to do. Now there is a new empiricism, a renewed examination of what successful managers actually do, the objective of which has been not to criticize their behavior but to generalize from their experiences. As a result the practices of "excellent" managers have all but driven conceptually-based prescriptions from management writings.

This preoccupation with excellent practices will undoubtedly lead to a new bout of theory building. For it seems that all systems of knowledge (theories as well as organizations) go through such oscillations, with each swing between hypothesis and experiment being required to correct the excesses of the previous cycle and to advance the process. In management literature these swings usually have the effect of rendering obsolete the majority of writings from the previous period. Those that survive are the "classics", works that capture the essence of the dialectical process and hence prove extremely durable.

When the search for new theory begins, management writers will undoubtedly turn to the works of Mary Parker Follett, for they are just such classics. Trained as an idealist philosopher, she was also an empiricist who believed that the behavior of managers was the only worthwhile object of study:

*"I went . . . to a . . . meeting where a group of economists and M.P.'s talked of current affairs . . . It all seemed a little vague to me, did not really seem to come to grips with our problem. The next evening I went to a dinner of twenty business men . . . There I found hope for the future. These men were not theorising or dogmatising; they were*



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thinking of what they had actually done and they were willing to try new ways the next morning . . ." *Freedom & Co-ordination* (F&C).

Few writers other than Mary Parker Follett have understood so well the foggy world in which managers operate, a world in which they must continually weave together the actual and the abstract, grappling with the future but forced to use conceptual instruments developed from the past:

"Conceptual pictures are always pictures of the past; you proceed then to deduce principles, laws, rules, from the dead instead of the living . . . thought alone does not govern activity; my pictures depend on my behavior." *Creative Experience* (CE).

#### Thought and Action Cannot be Separated

She was totally opposed to the separation of concepts from behavior and the use of verbal logic to obtain a superficial consensus in organizations.

"You can often get a specious consensus on the intellectual level which in virtue of the prestige of verbal agreement arrests the activity of your mind, but the only real consensus is that which arises on the motor level. The theory of consent rests on the wholly intellectualistic fallacy that thought and action can be separated . . . on the assumption that we think with our 'minds' and we don't . . . how often we see cases where we have not been able to persuade people, by our most careful reasoning, to think differently, but later, by giving them an opportunity to enter on a certain course of action, their 'minds' are thereby changed." *CE*.

This is helpful advice to managers, who in the 1970s struggled so to implement strategies that had been formulated conceptually with little input from operating management. Despite their best efforts to appeal to their operators' minds by presenting the strategies as logical conclusions from a rational analysis of the situation, there was often little zest for their implementation. "There's nothing wrong with the strategy," we cried, "It was faulty implementation." But Follett's writings remind us that

behavior can change our frameworks of logic and that the formulation of effective strategy may actually follow successful implementation. What we have been calling strategy may often be emergent rather than planned; implementation may precede or at least be concurrent with formulation.

Follett's practical orientation was matched by a sophisticated philosophy that yielded insights not available from the more reductionist, positivistic philosophies that have underpinned management theory in the post-World War II era. As a contemporary of both Henri Bergson (1859-1941) and Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1948) she was much influenced by their view of life and indeed of reality itself as fundamentally a creative process. For her there is no objective reality "out there", only what we construct. Experience itself is a creative integration:

"But our true environment is psychic . . . (E)nviro-ment is not a hard and rigid something external to us . . . (B)oth self and environment are always in the making . . . Progress implies respect for the creative process not the created thing; the created thing is forever . . . being left behind us . . . life is creative at every moment." *The New State* (TNS).

After a lengthy love affair with behaviorism, it is only recently that mainstream American psychology has begun to be sympathetic to a more cognitive psychology that emphasizes the constructed nature of our realities. And it is only in the last few years that this perspective has started to make itself felt in management writings.

Follett paid particular attention to the social process that takes place between people in groups:

"It is an acting and reacting, a single and identical process which brings out differences and

#### MARY PARKER FOLLETT BOOKS REFERENCED

- Freedom & Co-ordination: Lectures in Business Organization*, Garland Publishers, N.Y., 1987.  
*Creative Experience*, Peter Smith, N.Y., 1951.  
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*Dynamic Administration*, Pitman, London, 1965.

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*“The aim of management is to attain unity,  
not uniformity.”*

integrates them into a unity. The complex reciprocal action, the intricate interweavings of the members of the group, is the social process.” *TNS*.

Her message to managers (and to politicians, for she was firstly a political scientist) is “don’t hug your blueprints,” for the process we call experience is a creative one. Ethics, purpose, power, authority and control do not exist like blueprints, prior to and independent of action. Rather they are emergent, dynamic qualities.

#### **Ethics and Purpose Emerge from Process**

There is much talk today of the need for vision and values in business but little understanding of how managers go about developing them. Too often the belief seems to be that, like strategy, they can be developed rationally in the single, synoptic mind of the CEO. Follett would have rejected this view; according to her, ethics and purpose are aspects of organization that emerge from process:

“... morality is never static; it advances as life advances. You cannot hang your ideals up on pegs and take down no. 2 for certain emergencies and no. 4 for others. The true test of our morality is not the rigidity with which we adhere to standard, but the loyalty we show to the life which constructs standards ... whether we are pouring our life into our visions only to receive it back with its miraculous enhancement for new uses”. *TNS*.

Vision, then, is evolving purpose:

“The truth is that the same process which creates all else creates the very purpose. (P)urpose is involved in the process, not prior to process ... The whole philosophy of cause and effect must be re-written.” *TNS*.

She contends that loyalty develops in a similar fashion:

“Loyalty is awakened ... by the very process which creates the group ... Our task is not to ‘find’ causes to awaken our loyalty, but to live our life fully and loyalty issues ... Loyalty to a collective will which we have not created ... is slavery.” *TNS*.

Then, in a circular response, loyalty feeds back to develop further purpose: “We create the common will and feel the spiritual energy which flows into us from the purpose we have made, for the purpose which we seek.” *TNS*.

#### **Power, Authority and Control**

In a similar fashion Follett’s process philosophy views power, authority and control within organizations, not as substances or entities that can be transferred, delegated or handed over, but as evolutionary products emerging from process:

“Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but coactive control.” *CE*.

She explained this kind of power as follows:

“When you and I decide on a course of action together and do that thing, you have no power over me nor I over you, but we have power over ourselves together.” *CE*.

True power then is “power with” another, not “power over” another. Until everyone within an organization realizes that they are bound together, each will see only their own situation. “Power with” can only come from obedience to a single, shared situation. Follett called this “the law of the situation”:

“One person should not give orders to another person, but both should agree to take their orders from the situation.” *Dynamic Administration (DA)*.

Perhaps this is why managers in the 1970s seemed so powerless to implement “their” strategies. They had “power over” – formal power – but the strategies themselves did not generate “power with”, that is, they did not emerge as the “law of the situation” whereby all could be empowered (to use the modern buzzword) to implement them.

Authority, like power, also grows from the social process:

“... authority is not something from the top which filters down to those below ... It does not come from separating people ... into two classes, those who command (and) those who obey. It comes from the intermingling of all, of my work fitting into yours and yours into mine, and from that intermingling of forces a power being created which will control those forces. Authority is a self-generating process.” *F&C*.

#### **Group Coordination is Required**

In societies we often think of the individual as being the opposite of the group, that groups

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negate individuality. No doubt groups can do this, but Follett’s understanding of the social process illuminates the complementary nature of individuals and groups:

“We find the true man only through group organization. The potentialities of the individual remain potentialities until they are released by group life. Man discovers his true nature, gains his true freedom only through the group.” *TNS*.

The notion that groups (we would call them teams today) can evoke and release individual potential is central to Follett’s view of the interweaving processes that coordinate organizations:

“... you have to call out all the capacities of everyone in your organization before you can unite these capacities. Evoking, releasing, is the foundation of co-ordination.” *DA*.

Throughout her writings Follett emphasizes that the aim of management is to attain unity, not uniformity, and that “We attain unity only through variety. Differences must be integrated, not annihilated, nor absorbed.” *TNS*. For her, integration always means invention, the reaching of a creative solution to the differences arising out of the social process: “There are three ways of settling differences: by domination, by compromise, or by integration.” *F&C*. For her, the first two methods are unsatisfactory: “In dominating, only one way gets what it wants; in compromise neither side gets what it wants.” *F&C*.

The preferred method is integration:

“Integration involves invention, the finding of the third way ... never let yourself be bullied by an either-or situation ... Find a third way ... the third way means progress ... integration create(s) something new.” *F&C*.

The ability to integrate differences is characteristic of effective managers:

“In dissensions between executives it is never merely peace that should be our aim, but progress. We get progress when we find a way that includes the ideas of both ... parties ... But this requires hard thinking, inventiveness, ingenuity ... (it is not) a foregone conclusion; it is an achievement.” *DA*.

### **Leadership is the Integrating Process**

Mary Parker Follett’s writings are probably most relevant to us today in her extensive discussions of

leadership as an activity, the integrating process that releases and unites the energies within organizations. Because she emphasizes the sources of leadership in knowledge and experience rather than formal position, she can articulate clearly a theory of multiple leadership within a group:

“... there are different leadership qualities possessed by different men, but also different situations require different kinds of knowledge, and the man possessing the knowledge demanded by a certain situation ... (should) become the leader at that moment.” *DA*.

This mobility of leadership is, of course, the essence of effective teamwork, as the lead is seized by the appropriate team members as the situations change.

There has been much written in recent times about transformational or charismatic leadership. Follett is at her best in describing this process, for she understands clearly that a leader’s vision is not the expression of the lonely purpose of one individual. It is an interweaving of shared purposes, an integration of the experiences of many:

“The leader guides the group and is at the same time himself guided by the group, is always part of the group. No one can truly lead except from within ... the leader ... must interpret our experience to us, must see all the different points of view which underlie our daily activities ... He must give form to things vague, things latent, to mere tendencies. He must be able to lead us to wise decisions, not to impose his own wise decisions upon us. We need leaders, not masters or drivers.” *TNS*.

Perhaps none since Mary Parker Follett has better expressed this concept of leadership:

“The skilful leader then does not rely on personal force; he controls his group not by dominating but by expressing it. He stimulates what is best in us; he unifies and concentrates what we feel only gropingly and scatteringly, but he never gets away from the current of which we and he are both an integral part. He is a leader who gives form to the inchoate energy in every man. The person who influences me most is not he who does great deeds but he who makes me feel I can do great deeds.” *TNS*.

Thoroughly modern, Mary Parker Follett. BQ