

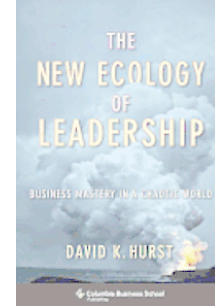
The New Ecology of Leadership: Business Mastery in a Chaotic World

Columbia Business School Publishing, 2012, hardback, xv + 346 pages, £19.95

ISBN 978-0-231-15970-8

■ by David K Hurst

reviewed by Tim Harle



The theme of the 2014 Faith in Business conference at Ridley Hall was *The Lifecycle of Business*.

Whether you attended the conference or not, David Hurst's book provides material to provoke our thinking. Born in the UK, growing up in South Africa and living in Canada, Hurst writes as a practising manager who is now a consultant with academic links. His distinctive contribution comes from viewing organisations as ecosystems, where life and death form part of both strategic and everyday expectations. This formed the background to his first book, *Crisis and Renewal* (Harvard, 1995).

Like his earlier book, *The New Ecology of Leadership* is framed around the ecocycle: a period of slow initial growth leads to strong growth, which then tails off. Charles Handy applied this concept to organisations, using the term sigmoid curve to reflect the similarity to the letter S traced by such a growth trajectory: indeed, they are now sometimes referred to as S-curves. In Hurst's distinctive representation of the ecocycle, the period after death loops back on itself to find a new beginning. This produces the infinity symbol, which is divided into front (growth) and back (crisis, death and renewal) loops. The ecocycle is an example of a new mental model, which Hurst is keen for us to explore.

The book is divided into five parts. The first section introduces concepts from different disciplines. As an example, fractals – scale-free patterns, which repeat at different levels in a system – are applied to organisations across space and time: observed behaviour provides a good example. These introductory chapters, including one illustrating an ecological

approach by comparing Wal-Mart to a forest, are admirably concise.

The second section looks at the 'front loop'. Hurst highlights the importance of communities of trust for innovation to happen in the chaotic initial period. He cites as an example Nonconformists in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution: '[r]ebelling against both the establishment and the established Church of England, they created communities of trust that encouraged individual initiative, but always in a group context' (p54). This leads to a growth period characterised by logic: this is not limited to rational cause-and-effect because humanity has evolved a mind which is 'better than rational' (p47). The period towards the top of the growth curve leads to death, where power is important for administrators. Here Hurst both builds on and extends standard works such as Weber on bureaucracy.

The third section investigates the 'back loop'. It begins with chapters replete with religious imagery: wilderness wanderings, climbing the mountain, the promised land. Hurst emphasises the importance of feedback loops (cybernetics is never far from the surface when applying ecological ideas to economic organisations). He points out that these can be virtuous or vicious, illustrating this with Starbucks' story in 2007, where over-rapid expansion led to a loss of distinctiveness in the customer's experience.

The fourth and longest section explores the 'sweet zone' between the traps of change and stability. This area around the intersection of the loops in the infinity symbol is encountered ►►

►► in both growth and death loops. In the former, it should be characterised by strategic management, while creative leadership is needed in the back loop to help confusion lead to community, where new growth can occur. Hurst introduces a number of practical approaches, including the role of narrative and storytelling to remember a community's past and provide hope for the future. Given his ecological and evolutionary background, it is no surprise to encounter concepts from the complexity sciences: these include self-organisation, as seen in termite mounds, and emergent phenomena, including wisdom (p190). Among industrial examples, Toyota is especially interesting. Initially introduced as a pioneer of lean management, Hurst notes the paradox of the Toyota Way, where standardisation (stability) is necessary for (adaptive) change. He goes on to cite Toyota as an example of the 'success trap' at the top end of a S-curve (p201f): their recall of millions of cars in 2009/10 dented their relentlessly earned reputation for quality.

A short concluding section summarises the key themes from the book, which is completed by a comprehensive series of endnotes, bibliography and index.

So what would a delegate at *The Lifecycle of Business* conference make of the book? There is a great deal to be welcomed. The combination of ecological, evolutionary and economic perspectives is a refreshing counter to linear rational texts. Hurst highlights the importance of context and the need for different approaches, underpinned by a consistency which creates trust. He neither draws over-rigid distinctions between managers and leaders nor amalgamates them: 'One manages with prose, but for leadership, poetry can be astonishingly helpful' (p155). He recognises the dangers inherent in the very contributions that first bring success. He has a subtle understanding of time, distinguishing the measurable *chronos* time of calendars and clocks from the unmeasurable *kairos* moment, or opportune occasion. If there is one topic not explicitly addressed, it is the question of whether growth is always good. Hurst is too subtle an author to deal in slogans about liberal capitalism's need for growth and our

planet's ability to sustain it. I would welcome his contribution to this debate, in human and economic terms.

The Faith in Business conference was held at a theological college. Hurst writes for practical managers and business thinkers, but how might a theologian develop a conversation? I suggest three fruitful areas to pursue.

First, a Christian theologian would want to explore the whole field of death and resurrection. Hurst deals with organisational, and by implication personal, decline and rebirth. His exploration of the wilderness wanderings in Exodus (an episode often cited as a liminal experience) could be richly linked to the peculiar hope of new birth, whether gradual or sudden, whether organisational or personal, which is so distinctive to Christians.

Secondly, Hurst's study of growth and the ossification that sets in near the top of a S-curve has echoes of the criticism applied to churches by contemporary missiologists such as Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. Our churches are too dominated by 'safe' pastors and teachers – where are the apostles and evangelists? Their APEST framework (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds (pastors) and teachers from Ephesians 4) offers a perspective to examine church growth curves (see eg Alan Hirsch & Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution*, Jossey-Bass, 2012). The disturbing role of the prophet would be especially interesting, and a little unsettling, to explore from an ecological perspective.

Lastly, two of the Benedictine vows – stability and conversion of life – resonate with Hurst: 'stability and change, far from being opposites, are inextricably bound up with each other' (p9). The vows offer both echoes of, and a counter to, the twin traps of too much change and too little change. The importance of community is another feature which Hurst shares with Benedict.

In summary, this is a book which effortlessly combines insights from a number of disciplines into a readable, and practical, whole. Highly recommended. ■

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