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Catholic From the Inside Out, by The Core Group

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Her story ends in surprising ways.

Barbara E. Wall faces the future, an apt ending voice to this section. She constructs what lies ahead for Catholic universities on many levels. The historical tradition of Catholic social thought eloquently frames her perspective.

SUMMARY

This is a good book, some of it – downright bold. Readers will be challenged, provoked even, into thinking more deeply about issues. This reviewer loaned the book to others, highlighting one section or another. Hesse-Biber captures its value: “You cannot create new paradigms unless there is some shared meaning. To dialogue means: to confront our assumptions; to suspend judgment; to accept and embrace differences; to listen as a means towards building a new paradigm” (p. 98).

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CATHOLIC FROM THE INSIDE OUT

THE CORE GROUP, GARDEN & WALL PUBLISHERS, 2003.

Reviewed by Gareth D. Zehrback

Catholic From the Inside Out (The Core Group, 2003) provides the reader with a unique perspective on educational reform. This book, written by a small group of educational practitioners rather than researchers, recounts the findings from a 2-year self study by an elementary Catholic school as it attempted to implement school-wide reforms. Besides the occasional infusion of Catholic jargon, the book is a straightforward read as its vocabulary and format are none too complex. The simplicity of the book, however, should not lead one to believe that its content does not offer valuable insights into educational reform. On the contrary, *Catholic From the Inside Out* gives witness to the powerful force that organizational culture can have on the performance of an organization.

A few years ago, the authors of the book, who call themselves “The Core Group,” believed that their school was lacking in its Catholic educational offerings to the community. This group was composed of various stakeholders that subscribed to a conservative Thomistic view of the world. They believed that the school needed an injection of spiritual energy. In an effort to do so, the school conducted several action research projects which were focused on the various aspects of Catholic schooling. For example, one group formed a committee to review the positive and negative aspects of the school’s discipline program. The group did not want to create an exhaustive list of what students should and should not do. Rather, the school wanted to create a climate where students and parents shared a mutual understanding of what type of behavior is expected at school. The following example regarding personal appearance illustrates the school’s approach to discipline and expectations. After the school saw an increase in bizarre facial piercing, the school asked parents to counsel with school personnel before allowing their children to come to school with drastically atypical changes in appearance. “Once parents had accepted this advice, we [the school] experienced no further problem” (The Core Group, 2003, p. 66). Indeed, what is remarkable here is the fact that the school realized that rules would not eradicate the school’s perceived problem of unusual exterior appearances; however, creating the expectation to respect the school’s belief in this domain would help remedy the problem.

The school used other strategies in an attempt to crystallize the Catholic educational experience. For instance, the school endeavors to use words that are specific to the Catholic faith. Indeed, by using words such as “eutraphalia” and “Pelagianism” on a daily basis, the school is distinguishing itself from other non-Catholic educational organizations. Another strategy used by the school was to educate the students and their families about the importance of attending Mass on a weekly basis and appropriately celebrating religious holidays. The school believed that it could not reach optimum levels of performance unless its students firmly understood the importance of properly celebrating Catholic rituals. After successfully instructing students and parents in this matter, the school witnessed positive results. The authors noted that “grace, joy, and serenity seemed to be flowing much more abundantly than before” (The Core Group, 2003, p. 90).

The most contentious topic in the book would probably center around the pedagogical beliefs that are espoused throughout. The authors decry many aspects of progressivism and support more traditional instructional approaches such as memorization. The authors make this belief very clear when they say, “We make no apology for making the acquisition of knowledge the direct goal of our school” (The Core Group, 2003, p. 47). The school believes that teaching children how to learn is something to be taught in high school and beyond, but not in elementary school. Those familiar,

however, with the findings from modern psychometric research and early-childhood research know that young children are able to demonstrate higher levels of thinking than people much older when exposed to rigorous curriculums that teach children how to be critical and analytical thinkers (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). For example, investigations by the National Research Council have shown that second graders who are taught by certain constructivist methods are capable of displaying a more thorough understanding of certain subject areas (i.e., physics) than college level students majoring in that area who were taught by more traditional approaches.

Nevertheless, whether the school employs traditional or progressive pedagogical approaches is not central to the book. The lesson that the book gives to us is that schools need to have conversations about their curriculum. Indeed, a positive culture of teaching can be cultivated if all stakeholders of a school, and especially the teachers can agree on what type of curriculum should be delivered.

The overarching strategy employed by The Core Group, (which is an attempt to change organizational behavior), has solid backing in current educational research. Indeed, the idea of creating and sustaining a positive and unified school culture has been shown to be a powerful catalyst for the realization of important school outcomes. Prominent researchers on school level reforms have shown that school culture is one of the most important aspects effecting school performance (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2000). Leaders can make change in other domains such as in the structure of an organization; however, these types of changes do not guarantee that behavior will actually alter. Weick (1976) talks about this when he describes schools as loosely-coupled organizations that are able to absorb numerous shocks or reform ideas. Indeed, schools can create policies for any domain that they please, but this does not mean that any true change will occur. The prior example of discipline exemplifies this point well.

Catholic From the Inside Out provides a real account of a school engaging in earnest self-reflection. It would be worthwhile for all schools, not just Catholic schools, that are suffering from a lack energy or focus. Without a doubt, the examples they propose are specific to a Catholic context, however the overarching ideas are universal for all organizations. An organization cannot operate at maximum effectiveness if its employees do not share a unified belief in the organization's mission.

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NINE LESSONS OF SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAMS: DISTILLING A DECADE OF INNOVATION

BILL MCKEEVER & THE CALIFORNIA SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY, WESTED, 2003.

Reviewed by Phyllis E. Superfisky, O.S.F., and Stephanie M. Flynn, S.S.J.

INTRODUCTION

Nine key lessons regarding school leadership teams are presented and discussed in this book in four chapters in the following broad categories: focusing work, building teams, developing leadership, and creating support. Practical information is provided along with useful case studies. The book details lessons that have been gleaned from the experience and programs of the California School Leadership Academy. The author successfully delineates each lesson by providing a detailed context after succinctly stating the lesson and introducing it “at a glance.” Each chapter is introduced by a directional quote and is summarized to provide a clear sense of direction for the reader. This book is a manageable guide for school leaders and teacher leaders.

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

Accountability and helping every child achieve are concepts very much in the forefront of our societal mind today. Successful schools are vying to remain so and schools suffering from low achievement are scrambling to find ways to improve. The lessons in this book have been derived from the experience of the California School Leadership Academy and document its attempts to answer this need of today’s schools.

Successful school leadership teams begin by focusing on continuous