

Book Selection

Edited by JOHN HOUGH

STAFFORD BEER: <i>The Heart of Enterprise</i>	861
COLIN EDEN, SUE JONES & DAVID SIMS: <i>Thinking in Organisations</i>	862
A. REISMAN: <i>Systems Analysis in Health-Care Delivery</i>	862
J. CASTI: <i>Connectivity, Complexity, and Catastrophe in Large Scale Systems</i>	863
B. BARBER <i>et al.</i> (Eds): <i>Medical Informatics—Berlin 1979</i>	864

The Heart of Enterprise

STAFFORD BEER

Wiley, U.K. 1979. 582 pp. £9.75
ISBN 0 471 27599 9

It is probable that the value of this book will not be fully assessed until others have written about the practices and theory which will assuredly stem from it. The arguments are plausible, not to say arresting, but it is too early to predict the changes in approach to management which must follow if the challenge in this book is accepted.

The message may be summarised by two quotations (pp. 254 and 392 respectively): "This book is addressed to managers to the end that they should find out (the criteria of viability for the Corporate system)" and "If cybernetics offers new insight, as I am sure it does, let them add rather than subtract".

Basically the book offers a method of understanding more about management processes and more about human response to those situations in which we all find ourselves. However, the purpose of such understanding is to enable the design of more effective systems to meet whatever goals the organisation wishes to achieve. It may be that the practising manager will find the precision of the language difficult to cope with but that is perhaps another reason for thinking that the success of book will depend upon the way others use it and develop the ideas.

In no sense will this writing be "popular" because the author does not set out to tell the reader what he probably wishes to believe. Indeed, in talking about current patterns of institutional organisation he expresses the view that "the consequences for humanity will probably be cataclysmic". It is not a comfortable feeling to have familiar supports cut away but the present poverty of understanding of organisation and management needs a challenge such as this to encourage growth, just as fruit trees yield better fruit after pruning.

No book which deals with concepts is easy to follow closely, especially when dealing with a subject in which so many of us are shallow and prejudiced yet claim expertise. In this case, however, the digestion of the reader is catered for in frequent resorts to refreshment (and recapitulation) and the effect is very acceptable.

This must be an important book. The academic world might have preferred other approaches to the problem of management and organisation but cybernetics cannot be ignored. My particular area of interest is the management of capital investment projects and I now propose to read the book again with a view to applying the philosophy outlined to the areas in which I have specialist knowledge. I hope that many others will do the same.

MAURICE SNOWDON