

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



*Douglas McGregor, Revisited: Managing the Human Side of Enterprise* by Gary HEIL, Warren BENNIS, and Deborah C. STEPHENS, New York: Wiley, 2000, 196 pp., ISBN 0-471-31462-5.

George Strauss

Volume 57, numéro 1, hiver 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006718ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/006718ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Strauss, G. (2002). Compte rendu de [*Douglas McGregor, Revisited: Managing the Human Side of Enterprise* by Gary HEIL, Warren BENNIS, and Deborah C. STEPHENS, New York: Wiley, 2000, 196 pp., ISBN 0-471-31462-5.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 57(1), 198–200.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/006718ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2002

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

é  
rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

views on globalization. If this reviewer has a major criticism of this book, it is—as is so often the case today—that labour relations processes are dealt with second hand. Future publications should pay more attention to labour relations outcomes, whether they be achievements or failures. For example, what have labour and management jointly achieved, or attempted to achieve internationally in meeting the challenges of globalization? Research should be

conducted beyond codes of conduct and international agreements.

Much appreciation is due to Professor Richard Chaykowski for having edited the book, with remarkable care, in addition to playing a leading role in the organization of this successful and productive forum.

FÉLIX QUINET  
University of Ottawa

***Douglas McGregor, Revisited: Managing the Human Side of Enterprise***

by Gary HEIL, Warren BENNIS, and Deborah C. STEPHENS, New York: Wiley, 2000, 196 pp., ISBN 0-471-31462-5.

I was a student of Doug McGregor. In a way he was my mentor. This was in graduate school at MIT in the late 1940s, sometime before he coined his famous terms, “Theory X and Theory Y.” So it was with considerable anticipation that I opened this “revisiting” of Doug’s work hoping for its reevaluation in the light of present knowledge. Perhaps expecting too much, I ended disappointed.

The book revisits, but not critically, and it largely ignores some of the more complex elements of Doug’s evolving thoughts. Further, it is often unclear which of the concepts discussed are originally Doug’s and which are those of the present authors. Doug wrote clearly; they do not. But their main thesis comes through nicely: as business has become more technologically complex, the time has come to put McGregor’s teachings into practice, that is to build “intrinsically motivating, actualizing organization” and to create “cause[s] worthy of commitment.”

Aside from six years as President of Antioch College, Doug spent most of his professional career at MIT. During that time he wrote on many things, including labour-management relations, but his best known work centered on Theories X and Y and their implications. Every

manager, Doug argued, makes implicit assumptions about employee motivation. Admittedly oversimplifying, Doug distinguished between two sharply different sets of such assumptions or “theories.” Theory X is that workers are lazy, dislike responsibility, are resistant to change, and so “must be persuaded, rewarded, punished, controlled.” Theory Y is that workers are not inherently lazy or resistant to change. On the contrary “[t]he motivation, the potential for development, the capacity for assuming responsibility, the readiness to direct behavior toward organizational goals are all present in people. Management doesn’t put them there... The essential task of management is to arrange organizational conditions and methods of operation so that people can achieve their own goals *best* by directing *their own* efforts toward organizational objectives” (emphasis in the original). Among the Theory-Y related “organizational conditions and methods of operation” that Doug discussed were decentralization and delegation, job enlargement, participative management, and performance appraisal based on management by objectives. Today these techniques are often linked together under the general term “employee involvement.”

Strictly speaking, Theories X and Y were alternative managerial assumptions.

But McGregor and others of the “human relations school” enlarged upon this distinction with two important propositions: first, that the managerial behaviour of those who made Theory X assumptions would be autocratic and directive, while those with Theory Y views would be democratic and participative; and, second, that employees who worked for Theory Y managers would be both more satisfied and more productive. Happy and productive workers—the best of possible worlds. Much of the research in the field of human relations and later in organizational behavior has been concerned with the extent and circumstances under which this second proposition holds.

Despite the present book’s claim that Doug “was the first to apply behavioral science findings to the world of business,” there were numerous others, such as Maslow, Argyris, and Likert who were developing similar concepts at roughly the same time or earlier. Doug’s unique contribution was to state issues in simple (perhaps too simple) terms. Except regarding performance appraisal, he had little new to say about applying these concepts. Neither did he test empirically his observations as to the relationship between managerial assumptions and behaviour. Miles did this later on.

Theory Y and associated practices were widely accepted by academics until the late 1960s at which time they were challenged by new research, which suggested that whether they were appropriate in a given situation depended on such “contingent” factors as individual personality, organizational and community culture, and the nature of the work to be done. More recent research still—and the experiences at places such as NUMMI and Saturn—suggest that employment involvement techniques can “work” (in the sense of raising employee satisfaction, productivity, quality, and the like) even on auto assembly lines, but only under fairly restrictive

conditions. Theory Y works—sometimes. Though the term Theory Y is rarely heard, the basic philosophy is still quite popular.

The present authors largely ignore this history. They mention and reject contingency theory, but never describe what it is. Indeed the book might have been better titled “Theory Y Enlarged” or “Theory Y Applied,” since much of it consists of a sales pitch for Theory Y as well as some how-to-do-it lists, for example “10 guidelines for creating a better performance management system” and fourteen attributes of “successful teams,” such as “a shared commitment to clearly defined objectives,” “trust from the outset,” and “clear values and rules of behavior.” Some of the prescriptions are debatable: “now more than ever before, we must work to create a culture where loyalty to the company’s stakeholders (shareholders, employees, suppliers, and customers) supersedes all other loyalties” (even to family or community?) and “it is the responsibility of the employee to seek greater satisfaction through work” (regardless of how? even through artistic sabotage?). There is considerable discussion of the need to “align individual needs with organizational goals” but none as to whether this is consistent with layoffs.

By focusing on Theory Y, the authors leave out some of the more interesting aspects of Doug’s intellectual development. Doug was a more complex man than the book suggests. In a sense he was a fourth generation preacher (his great-grandfather was a Scottish Presbyterian minister; his grandfather founded a mission for the homeless, which Doug’s father continued; Doug as a boy would play the piano in evening services). True, Doug preached to corporate CEOs rather than the down-and-out and religion does not appear explicitly in his writing, but this background may be one key to understanding his personal values and his tendency to preach.

Another influence was psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis was very much in the air in the 1930s and Doug had a personal analysis. Psychoanalytic concepts, such as transference, popped up frequently in his teaching. It may also have something to do with the difficulties he faced coming to grips with the concept and exercise of authority. As he sometimes put it, boss-subordinate relations replicate those between parents and children. Subordinate dependence is a problem that can be alleviated but never entirely eliminated.

Doug saw his presidency of Antioch, already a highly democratic college, as an opportunity to put Theory Y into practice. "I believed" he said, "that a leader could operate successfully as a kind of adviser to his organization. I thought I could avoid being a 'boss'... I could not have been more wrong... I finally began to realize that a leader cannot avoid the exercise of authority anymore than he can avoid responsibility for what happens to his organization. In fact it a major responsibility of a top executive to take on his own shoulders the responsibility for resolving the uncertainties that are always involved in important decisions... The boss must boss." This view is more than Theory Y, though it could well be viewed as consistent with it. (The book describes recent successes in companies such as NuCor and Herman Miller. It might have been more interesting had it described Doug's at times tumultuous experience at Antioch.)

Another hot topic of the time was unionism. Doug served as personnel director of the Dewey and Almy Chemical Company during the war and had written about it (with Joe Scanlon, a former Steel Workers' staff member). For him, "cooperation between management and union might be a powerful

force to increase productive efficiency." In a sense, union-management cooperation was a group-level counterpart to Theory Y at the boss-subordinate level. As he saw it, union-management relations could go through three stages, from active conflict through collective bargaining to active union-management cooperation. "The transition from stage to stage" can be viewed "as a process of psychological growth and development similar to that experienced by the individual as he passes from infancy through childhood and adolescence to maturity... a slow and arduous process."

Non-directive listening, first introduced in Hawthorne, was another major interest in the 1930-40s. Doug saw it as key to problem resolution. As students we spent much class time role-playing the handling of boss-subordinate and steward-foreman relations. Many problems resulted from misunderstanding, he believed. Good listening was a first step toward solving them. Even when misunderstanding was not the problem, a well-trained listener could help people resolve problems by themselves. Like a good father, a good boss had to be a patient listener.

Many of these views might seem naive today, even quaint. However they were notable advances at the time. A complete revisiting of McGregor might have taken them into account. But this was clearly not the authors' intentions. The book is directed to managers, not academicians. For this purpose it might be useful. Fortunately, the book's last section includes portions of Doug's more important works. In my view one would do better to read Doug in the original in these sections first.

**GEORGE STRAUSS**  
University of California