

RECLAIMING
INDIVIDUAL POWER
IN A TIME OF TEAMS,
WORK GROUPS,
AND OTHER
CROWDS

STANLEY M. HERMAN

FORCE OF S

Reclaiming Individual Power in a Time of Teams, Work Groups, and Other Crowds

Stanley M. Herman



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To Georgia Herman, who read each one of these pages three times or more and helped to keep me on track, or at least from going off track too badly

Preface

You and I live and work in an era of global markets, worldwide corporate alliances, and mega programs, and the intricate interdependent organizational relationships that are essential to these human undertakings. The age of the single craftsman or craftswoman producing a personal creation is all but gone. Now almost all work has become so complex and segmented that it requires collections of people to perform. Most management and organizational experts in the last decade have been focusing their study and the advice they give to operating managers on how to stimulate the involvement of such collections of people and draw upon their combined knowledge, a process that in current organizational terminology is called group empowerment.

A Force of Ones is a manual for individual survival in these big-system, group-oriented times. I don't argue against the reality of today's organizational interdependencies, but I do say that focusing almost exclusively on groups, teams, and other collectives is creating an imbalance and becoming counterproductive. Groups and teams are useful and satisfying for some pur-

poses, but they can be frustrating and worse than useless for others.

A Force of Ones focuses on what you and I as single individuals can be and can do at work. Managers cannot really empower groups to be inventive or courageous, to confront tough issues rather than avoid them, or to choose courses of action that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable to individual group members. Only individuals can see beyond conventionally popular views, depart from consensus and stand for an unpopular position, generate a personal, driving vision that will inspire others to take a new direction, or risk resources and personal reputation to achieve a vision. And managers cannot compel individuals to be empowered; individuals have to empower themselves.

Audience

I address this book to managers, those who aspire to manage, and all those employees who want to know what they can do to make a place for themselves in their organizations—to do more than just fill a slot—where they will be called on to make creative and productive contributions and from which in return they can derive both success and personal satisfaction.

Whatever your position, my goal is to encourage and guide you in identifying your own particular strengths, honing them, and using them to get what you want out of your life and organizational career. My goal is also to show that individuality is important to organizations as well as to persons and that if you don't recognize the individual characteristics of an organization (whether a small work group or a giant corporation),

you are doomed to prescribe and follow mass remedies (such as team-building, zero-based budgeting, or TQM) that often treat the wrong problem.

I want A Force of Ones to be a book that earns itself a long-term lease on your bookshelf, a book that you pull down from time to time as your career progresses. The subjects and tools it covers apply to specialists and people in other nonmanagerial jobs as well as at all levels of management. Whatever your position, you will find ideas worth understanding about people who occupy other levels: what their worlds look like to them, how they can lose their focus, and how by getting back to the basics of their individuality, they can find their focus again. You may be surprised to learn the thinking that lies behind some of the apparently irrational acts of your boss or subordinate.

Overview of the Contents

The Introduction explores what it means to reclaim your individualism and use it. The remainder of the book is divided into four major parts, each based on a theme.

Part One, "Tapping into Your Singular Vision," describes how we individually build many of the most formidable barriers to doing what we want to do and satisfying ourselves. Often, these self-imposed prohibitions don't serve the "culturally correct" purposes we think they will. The chapters in Part One suggest a number of options for discovering and refining what you, as an individual, want to do and for making your input and influence felt in basic one-on-one (mano-a-mano) interactions with others in your organization. I also speak directly to managers about the reality (in contrast to the mythology) of managers

ment work. Despite the conventional view of management as a planning and control function, management is mainly a job of reacting to unforeseen demands. Part One provides tools for cutting through time-consuming rituals, identifying what is important and what is not, and tapping into your own and other people's energy and skills to make things happen.

Part Two, "Staying Centered in Key Work Relationships," shows you how to recognize and tailor your own version of the skills you need to improve your power and personal satisfaction, in other words, to get better at what you do and enjoy it more. Prerequisites for this process are taking time to step off the treadmill of your regular routines to check out what is working for you and what isn't, then making a *small* number of adjustments that are practical for you as an individual person. Part Two focuses especially on working relationships with bosses and subordinates. It identifies ways of obtaining relatively honest impressions of how your boss and your employees see you, and ways to tell the difference between what is important in that information and what is just static.

Part Three, "Organizations Are Individuals, Too," deals with individualism as an underlying orientation and operative value of groups ranging in size from small project teams to whole companies. Organizations vary critically in their character and stage of development, and what is right for one can be dead wrong for another. No organization can improve on all dimensions at the same time—there simply are not enough time, resources, and energy. Whether you are a specialist, a supervisor, or a CEO, you have to make choices. Those choices will be good ones only if they fit with the individual character and situation of your organization. Otherwise, though they may

conform to the latest popular improvement program, they'll waste time, money, and worst of all, the investment of people's spirit.

In Part Three, I explore the advantages and disadvantages of participative management and employee involvement and suggest when participative approaches are likely to be useful and when they are likelier to be self-defeating. It is important to distinguish between at least two kinds of team formation: the general inclusion group (GIG) for working on gradual, incremental improvement in productivity, and the individual initiative network (IIN) for developing major discontinuous changes in response to high-challenge problems or opportunities.

I also talk about conflict in organizations and some of the options for dealing with it when both parties are genuinely willing to resolve their issues, as opposed to times when the other guy is really out to get you. And I look at major programs to change organizational cultures, focusing on why total quality management, organization excellence, or any of a long line of similar pop programs with catchy slogans often produce such limited results. Unless the right individuals (starting at the top) concentrate on a few carefully selected objectives, both time and dollar resources will probably be dissipated, with few results to show for it. Given today's high level of investment in major organizational improvement programs, it is important that what is likely to be useful and what is not be generally understood, by individuals at all levels rather than just by specialist administrators and top executives. Only then can the ideas and activities of big-system proposals be tested for realism by the people who are supposed to make them work.

Part Four, "Customs of Command and Arts of the Possible," concludes A Force of Ones. It encourages readers to recognize that power and politics are not necessarily dirty words. Instead, they are inescapable elements in human interactions. Here, I ask you if you do or don't want to be a serious player in organizational power and politics, and I suggest some ways you can control your choices. Whether or not you choose to play in this series of games, it's important for you to understand them, at least at a rudimentary level; so a set of political tactics (of the softball variety) is presented for your practical use. The book closes with a commentary on the spirit of individualism and a recap of the basics for finding and expressing more of your own individualism.

At the end of each chapter, I have included a page of notes containing points particularly worth remembering. There is also space for you to add your own notes. The book also contains many exercises and guidelines. They are designed to be understood and used quickly on the job. All were originally developed for practical use in organizations, including very large corporations, small businesses, government agencies, and even volunteer church and charity groups. In addition, A Force of Ones features stories and poems. Stories lend depth and human subtlety to intellectual points and prescriptions, and poems allow a writer to say more in fewer words and, it is hoped, a reader to hear more.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the people who contributed (over three decades) to this book's existence and content. Many at the

PREFACE

Gestalt Institute of Cleveland helped me to see things in new ways. A veritable corps of organizational and management consultants at General Electric Company and TRW taught me practical skills and tactics. I especially want to thank the clients I worked with in ways that helped both them and me discover what was useful (and what was not). And a special thanks, too, to Steven Katten, my "sanity checker"; Sarah Polster, whose determination made this a better book than it would otherwise have been; and Geoffrey Bellman, who in some mysterious way helped me start the project.

Escondido, California December 1993 Stanley M. Herman

The Author

STANLEY M. HERMAN consults to senior and middle managers both in major corporations and in smaller public and private organizations on organizational effectiveness. For more than a decade, he has studied the management styles and career progress of a group of managers and executives in several industries, focusing particularly on the critical factors in their individual advancement (and, sometimes, decline).

Herman is the author of *The People Specialists* (1968) and, with Michael Korenich, *Authentic Management* (1977), which was translated into Japanese. He has also written scores of articles for management publications, and columns for newspapers and magazines, and has appeared in management films and videos. He is the principal developer of Authentic Management, a pioneering approach to contingency management, and he has taught at several universities, including the University of Southern California; the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Richmond; the University of Wisconsin; Pepperdine University's Master of Science in Organization Development program; the Federal Executive Institute; as well as in other professional development programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Reclaiming the Power of the Individual

A Force of Ones addresses people working in organizations. It asserts that the thoughts, decisions, and actions of individuals—single, solitary persons—are critically important, both to the individuals themselves and to their organizations, a fact that has tended to get lost in the attention most organizational authorities have given to work groups and large organizational units over the last decade. The simplest way to express the point is this: all human organizations, no matter how simple or complex, large or small, are based on interaction between individuals. Therefore, a crucial element of the success or failure of an enterprise depends on the results of interaction between key individuals.

If the CEO can't find a way to convince a key board member, there will be no acquisition this year. If the product design manager doesn't come back to her boss time after time to argue for the introduction of new technology rather than a face-lift for the old product, the company may fall behind its competition irreparably. If the employee who works in the clean room doesn't believe what the company trainer is saying about quality or thinks it's against his best interests, he won't change his way

INTRODUCTION

of operating. And he will communicate his viewpoint to his fellow workers.

For the individual, the organization is one of life's arenas, a place where friends and opponents are made, "sports" are played, and contests held—for fun and profit by some, for human betterment or a strongly held principle by others, and for a personal sense of victory or accomplishment by still others. These diverse motives are part of the yeasty whole of organizations, and they give balance and energy to each other. As a player, the individual in this arena has the opportunity to exercise his or her abilities, to discover new knowledge and old wisdom. He or she will encounter joys that elate and disappointments that temper. He or she can experience the strength that derives from marching in solid phalanx with the collective view, and that other strength that can only be found when the individual stands alone, apart from the collective view.

A Force of Ones is for people who work in organizations. It is for both managers and nonmanagers who recognize managing as more art than science and who want to know how to apply their own and others' individuality in ways that produce more relevant and inventive solutions to problems and increase work satisfaction and pleasure. It is for people who have grown skeptical about management preachments that are offered as cure-alls for what ails everybody.

This book about reclaiming your individual power and using it effectively in your organization is based on two assumptions: that there are not a few but *many* routes to a successful and satisfying career and that your unique character, inclinations,