

Book reviews

Raelin J.A.: *Work-Based Learning: the New Frontier of Management Development*. Upper Saddle River, N.J. Addison-Wesley, 1999, pp. 281, ISBN-0-20143388-5.

Raelin locates his claim for the importance of work-based learning in the context of an organizational imperative to learn continuously in order to cope with change. Learning, as an 'organizational property that extends to all managers', can best be introduced, he suggests, by making learning arise from work itself. Central to such learning is reflection with others, an activity which Raelin identifies as 'key to competing successfully in the twenty-first century marketplace'. Beyond the initial, ritual claims for the novelty and centrality of the topic, and the cramped and ugly typesetting, lies a useful and comprehensive treatment of work-based learning, developed over eleven chapters.

Raelin initially contrasts the value of reflection and the 'meta-competence' of learning to learn with the dangers of executive predilections for constant action; the poor return on effort achieved in classroom-based learning; the limited value of job rotation in the absence of opportunities to reflect on learning; and the inadequacy of simulated work experiences which often present learners with a too neat set of problems. He goes on, in chapter three, to argue for work-based learning as 'an engine for transforming an organization to be receptive to learning' (p. 29), by encouraging regular reflection, giving the confidence to challenge assumptions, and going beyond teamwork which is simply task-based.

The theory of work-based learning presented in chapter four is perhaps the least rewarding in the book. Raelin seems overly apologetic about the need to discuss the relationship between theory and practice, skirts the central problem of Cartesian dualism without clearly setting out the issues, then cites Ryle (1945) without acknowledging his damaging attack on this dualism. Some of the comments here are, for this reader at least, simply confusing. For example, 'In probing reality, modernists need to separate themselves from their viewpoints so that they can 'know' an objective world' (p. 52).

Nonetheless, subsequent chapters provide useful and informative treatments of key issues such as action

learning, communities of practice, virtual team learning, reflective practices, facilitation, action projects, and the evaluation of work-based learning. In all cases Raelin provides a wide range of both academic and practitioner viewpoints, along with concrete examples from a large number of organizations, and this combination of approaches is one of the great strengths of the book. The author concludes with a prototype work-based learning programme, a series of short case studies and a list of university-sponsored work-based learning programmes.

Although Raelin takes a rather uncritical stance towards the theories and practices discussed, this book will be of interest to practitioners looking for a practical introduction to the topic, and to academics seeking an overview of reflective practices in modern organizations (albeit from a managerial perspective).

Keith Goodall

*China Europe International Business School,
Shanghai, China*

Tim Ambler and Morgen Witzel: *Doing Business in China*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, Paperback, 222 pp.

Why do we need another book on *Doing Business in China*? This is the question asked by the authors themselves. Certainly, since China started economic reform and open door policy in the late 1970s, many foreign companies have invested in China or been engaged in trade with China. At the same time, many scholars and practitioners have written many books about doing business in China. However, this recent publication has its unique characteristics.

One is its comprehensiveness. This book covers a wide range of issues, including the concept and mindset of doing business between China and Western perspective, cultural tradition and its implications for business, the review of current business environment in terms of political, social and economic changes in China, business risk analysis and marketing strategies, and some crucial suggestions for foreign business people who are interested in doing business in China.

Second is its usefulness. This book provides a very practical approach towards the central issue of doing

business in China. The authors cover a wide range of surveys and provided inside knowledge about the key issues related to successful or failing outcome. They also designed many boxes in the text to highlight some important advises and cases.

Third is its comparative oriented analysis. The authors categorize four major groups of people in terms of their business practices: Chinese in the mainland of China, overseas Chinese outside the mainland, other east Asian business people and Western business people. By identifying the commonalities and differences among those groups, business people can fit themselves into a cross-cultural environment and be aware of other peoples, way of doing business.

The least but not last is its practical advice. In the conclusion, the authors provide the five pillars of doing business in China, namely *guanxi* (connection), continuity, the market, *ren* (obligation and kindness of leaders) and obstacles. Under each pillar, the authors give suggestions for action. By following such advice, foreign business people certainly may benefit from their

business engagements in China and minimize the negative aspects.

Certainly, cultural understanding and awareness of business environments in another country are crucial for business success. However, the most important advice I would like to add is that foreign business people should have in mind their competitiveness in terms of the quality, function, services and price of their commodities, products or projects, and the know how to maintain their competitive edge in another country. Without such fundamentals, any business activities can not be sustained in the long run. All in all, this book is not only useful for business people but may also be helpful for students who are undertaking studies on business management.

Ying Zhu
Department of Management
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, Victoria
Australia 3010