

Helgesen, Sally. (1995). *The web of inclusion*. New York: Doubleday.

Reviewed by

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Biographical Information

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Similar to organizations in other industries, leisure organizations are facing the need to adapt to the rapidly changing knowledge and information society of the twenty-first century. If we view the leisure industry as an example, it is clear that the possession of knowledge and information in a number of areas such as community needs and societal trends are key factors in contributing to program and organizational success. Knowledge-based organizations of the next century require flexibility and the ability to adapt their structures, systems, and processes. Managers that recognize that change will be a constant part of their organization will be successful. This is the essence of *The web of inclusion* by Sally Helgesen. While similar arguments for flatter structures, matrix organizations, teams, and adhocracies are found in the organizational theory literature, in her view of structural change, Helgesen extends the organic metaphor and provides a refreshing look at the processes that underpin organizational change in general, and the web of inclusion in particular. In advocating and demonstrating how traditional hierarchical structures can be broken down to facilitate more flexible and responsive organizations, Helgesen provides a theoretical framework that is supported with strong practical applications. The book is presented in three parts: Part I, The architecture of the web; Part II, The web in operation; and Part III, Weaving the web.

In Part I, the first two chapters provide the rationale and theoretical foundation for the web of inclusion. Drawing on her own experiences and research, Helgesen describes how the web of inclusion emerged as a result of her investigation of organizations run by women as described in her earlier book *The female advantage*. Contrasting with the traditional hierarchical functioning found in most organizations, Helgesen found structures that were circular not pyramids; the leader was at the center not at the top; communication radiated outward not from the top down. These organizations had irregular and interconnected patterns of relationships and were inclusive by bringing everyone close to the center and encouraging participation.

While Helgesen describes the web of inclusion as both "a pattern: a model for coherently ordering people and their tasks; and a process, a way of thinking and acting, of

behaving and solving problems as they arise" (p. 19), her focus is on process. Building a web means that information flows in every direction; that ideas come from all personnel, especially from the grassroots or front-line; that networks of teams working on tasks define what individuals do, not their titles; that flexibility is critical; that trial and error enable the organization to evolve and learn; and that the organization connects with its constituents--customers, suppliers, partners, media, government, etc.

The application of this new way of operating is provided in Part II where Helgesen introduces five key issues that all organizations will face as they enter the next century: marketing, diversity, empowerment, learning, and strategic alliances. The reader can easily identify how these issues are relevant to leisure organizations. Helgesen argues that the web of inclusion is the pattern and process by which to address these issues because it can break down the internal and external barriers of traditional hierarchies promoting flexibility in responding to change while providing a satisfying work environment.

These five issues provide the themes for the five chapters that make up Part II of the book. Drawing on her research in organizations, Helgesen is able to provide five comprehensive cases of how organizations are using webs to achieve success: the issue of marketing at the hi-tech Intel organization; diversity at the Miami Herald newspaper; front-line empowerment of nurses at Beth Israel Hospital; training and learning at Anixter Inc., a cable and wire distributor; and strategic alliances at the entertainment organization, Nickelodeon. Covering a wide range of service and product organizations, Helgesen is able to demonstrate the various strengths of the web of inclusion as well as the difficulties in adopting this innovative design. Her aim in these cases is to show how webs break down barriers so that tasks and operations can be integrated across the organization which enable more acute responsiveness to their communities, clients, and organizational members and provide conditions for continual change.

For the reader, these chapters are both enlightening and overwhelming. The majority of the material, while well written and informative, is at times too detailed and difficult to wade through in finding the link back to the theory. Nevertheless, while the chapters in this section are very specific to the organizations profiled and may deter some readers, for the discerning reader, the rich description of historical detail, organizational culture, strategy, and leadership provides informative cases for analysis and discussion on the topic of organizational change. These cases can be used to enhance our understanding of how these issues have been or could be addressed in leisure organizations, a worthy class project or exercise.

In the final two chapters that make up Part III, Helgesen discusses areas that need to be addressed if the web of inclusion is to succeed. The first is the physical structure of organizations. An inclusive process needs to be supported by structuring space so people can meet, interact, and exchange ideas. Traditional hierarchical organizations allocate space according to rank, the corner office on the top floor is an aspiration of many managers! However, in the web of inclusion work space is designed so that it facilitates the accomplishment of tasks. Providing communal space where unstructured conversations

are encouraged as opportunities for ideas to be expressed and creativity to emerge; and designing office space that is flexible, expanding if tasks are large and require more space or contracting can if there is a need to work alone are just a few examples.

The second area that is critical to the web is that of participation through networks, grassroots involvement, and access to information. Inclusiveness as a fundamental value needs to be established as does the flexibility in form and communication links. Building on the organic metaphor to describe the life of, and in, organizations, Helgesen's theoretical arguments and practical applications suggest the web of inclusion is consistent with the changing values about work in organizations that respect individual autonomy, promote cooperation and communication, and ensure adaptability.

The web of inclusion offers a theory and practical applications and thus is conducive to the learning experience. As such, it would be valuable supplementary reading for a graduate level class that may be investigating organizational change and restructuring. At this level students would be able to discuss the application to the leisure or recreation field without too much difficulty. For instructors, Helgesen's book provides a valuable resource as an alternative to traditional organizational theory discussions about restructuring and provides a revolutionary design alternative to which leisure organizations can aspire. It also provides a rich source of case studies on issues that relate to leisure studies and thus provides a framework for research in our own field.