

Book Review

Iron Has Memory, Rocks Breathe Slowly, Crystals Learn, by Keith Q. Owen, A. Steven Dietz, and Robert “Skip” Culbertson. Emergent Publications: Litchfield Park, AZ. 2014. vii + 130 pp. ISBN 978-1-938158-12-4.

This book is a monograph about human system change, specifically organization-level culture and change. The ideas presented are grounded in complexity and adopt the nonlinear worldview. This short book is just the right size and subject-matter for your next trans-ocean airplane flight: collectively, the three authors take you on a 60,000-word essay that is interesting and thought provoking and engaging, yet is rather cognitively light—perfect for those of us riding in economy class.

According to the book’s preface, the origin of the three metaphors making up the book’s title is a keynote address for a 1992 Australian Quality Council conference by the late Oscar Mink, an expert in executive and organizational development and total quality management and former professor of curriculum studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His address was published in a now-defunct academic journal, but over time, his ideas persisted in the classroom. An integration of the core ideas of Professor Mink with the experience from the consulting practice of the book’s authors results in this monograph. Indeed, the book contains ideas crafted twenty-five years ago, but they seem to be timeless as the insights come across fresh and present-day, regardless of the antiquated origin.

The book consists of three loosely coupled parts, each part coinciding with its offbeat three-piece, metaphoric title. The first part, entitled “Iron has memory,” explicates that the characteristics of a human culture are persistent, and resistant to hasty change. It is a novice-friendly introduction to culture and how it develops as a product of a group’s routines and reward systems. In just two paragraphs the authors explain the “Iron has memory” metaphor, which is of course obligatory given the book’s uniquely-styled title; though the brevity of their explanation comes across as merely complying to a necessity and is rather disappointing given the curiosity being aroused via the book’s title. The use of the first metaphor within the book essentially ends at this point.

Part Two, “Rocks breath slowly,” highlights the ordinarily unstated idea that culture has a purpose—to serve as a stabilizer for its host society—and that it can evolve, albeit very slowly. The essay opens with a short, two-paragraph explanation and tie-in to the “rocks breath slowly” metaphor, which is interesting, but like “Iron...” it is disappointingly underutilized throughout the expanse of the book. Essentially, Part Two is a deeper essay—relative to Part One—on culture; instead this essay illuminates why culture exists and how a it

evolves. Part Two also introduces a quality of work life model and enigmatically refers to a survey instrument that measures employee perceptions in the context of organizational performance—both the model and survey instrument are used by the authors in their advisory practice. To this reviewer, it seems that the authors may have *lost their way* in this second essay; it's not clear what the objective of Part Two actually is.

The final essay in the trilogy, "Crystals learn," details a model of practical, actionable steps for enhancing or strengthening a culture, assuming *conditions are right*. The essay opens with four paragraphs explaining the "Crystals learn" metaphor and then transitions into briefly presenting and underdeveloping seven myths associated with culture change. Next the presentation moves into presenting a list of ten beliefs pertaining to adaptive cultures; like the seven myths presentation, this material is grossly underdeveloped. These lists are followed by an introduction to a culture change model that is an actionable framework designed for a group's leader. Part Three concludes with a twenty-page discussion of cultural transformation and a presentation of the authors' seven-step model called "The Total Transformation Process."

Reflecting on multiple *readings* of this book—first sequentially cover-to-cover, then numerous rereading in a random, hodgepodge manner—it is difficult for me to recollect any *aha-ideas* or specific take-away that were fixed into my memory. I certainly appreciate the introduction of the three metaphors as a conversation starter, perhaps as a mechanism to reduce my cognitive load while reading about a complex subject—culture—and to focus my thinking about the phenomenon. Indeed, just as iron has memory, it will flex back to its original shape, as does culture. Indeed, Rocks are porous and expand and contract according to heat just as culture is alive and breathes somewhat according to the changing environment. Indeed as crystals "don't just learn willy-nilly" (p. 65), cultures can learn and grow if the conditions are right. Unfortunately, these clever metaphors are underutilized in the book and appear to contribute little more to the essays than serving as a nontraditional title.

In short, I don't think that the content warrants being a stand-alone book. The three metaphors could just as effectively but more efficiently be presented in a Harvard Business Review article, or perhaps a book chapter; although, the presentation of the three essays combined into this short book does position the book well for the traveller browsing around an airport bookstore for a 40,000 ft. read. This book is somewhat odd in its contents and delivery, but is useful, nonetheless: it is certainly a *cost-efficient* publication on culture change. Just knowing the three metaphors introduced in this book, alone, may prove this book worthy of a quick read, especially if you are directly involved in organizational culture change projects.

-- Terrill L. Frantz
Peking University HSBC Business School
Shenzhen, China
E-mail: terrill@phbs.pku.edu.cn