

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Manuscript 1465

Book Review: Scaling People: Tactics for Management and Company Building

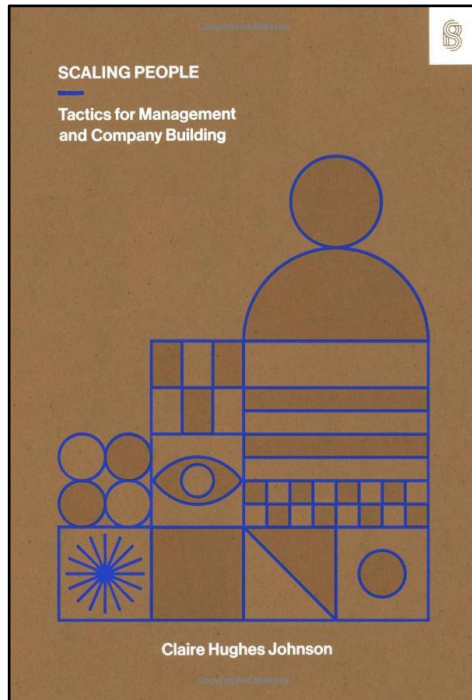
Carl Tolbert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl>



Part of the [Business Commons](#)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Business at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Values-Based Leadership by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.



Scaling People:

Tactics for Management and Company Building

Author: Claire Hughes Johnson

Reviewer: Carl Lee Tolbert Ph.D.

Publisher: Stripe Press (March 7, 2023)

Language: English

Hardcover: 480 pages

ISBN-10: 1953953212; **ISBN-13:** 978-1953953216

https://www.amazon.com/Scaling-People-Tactics-Management-building/dp/1953953212/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1680900408&sr=1-1

Claire Hughes Johnson, a veteran professional leader from Google, offers a personal guide full of insight and best practices associated with scaling a technological organization. The work starts differently than most by having the leader pause to reflect on their abilities, allowing an authentic substrate to form, and providing a bespoke plan of action. Hughes Johnson offers several novel insights into recruiting, hiring, and compensating new employees, as well as crucial performance management techniques to retain and optimize the performance of high-potential employees and managers.

Motivation and Intended Audience

Claire Hughes Johnson was the former chief operating officer of Stripe until 2021 when she stepped aside and became a corporate officer and adviser. Before joining Stripe, she had already spent 10 years with Google as a leader and manager in many areas and departments, including Gmail, which she discusses through the introduction, as the trials and tribulations of working for a fledgling Google was the impetus to this book. She serves on various boards from energy to education and champions for an education from Ivy League schools as she herself received her bachelor's degree from Brown University and an MBA from Yale. Hughes Johnson noted that the principal motivation for her to craft the book was that scaling a technological operation should not come at the expense of the people building it and that the enveloping process also required scaling the individuals and the applicational leaders. Hughes Johnson also revealed that her mission was always to foster superior management established by the strength and motivation of the teams focused on a singular vision.

The book is intended to be used in two ways, first as a textbook-like guide for organizational builders having a people-forward perspective and needing a thorough examination of scaling,

team-building, and maintaining an organization. The second use is akin to a troubleshooting guide to complicated topics such as hiring and compensation, performance management, and the management of managers that are not often found in general leadership works. The intended goal of Hughes Johnson was the accessibility of the issues with an intentional absence of academic discourse, as the focus was on sharing the practical lessons she had learned from her successful career.

Basic Operating Principles and Core Foundations

The organized structure of the book is indeed the scaffolding Hughes Johnson discusses early in the introduction as the means to create an operating system (OS) for the organization. The book is broken into five flattened segments: (1) operating principles, (2) foundations, (3) hiring, (4) team building, and (5) feedback. Each section has a series of exercises and templates, allowing the reader to have a more interactive experience and to engage at a deeper level with some topics as chosen, not taking away from the flow of the work and the intended structure. The book has an unsurprisingly short bibliography, as noted, being based more on actual work experiences rather than academics.

The basic operating principles discussions open the leader's need to first build self-awareness, which is novel to a leadership book noted by Hughes Johnson and also corroborated indirectly by Lencioni (2010), McChesney et al. (2021), and Friedman (2018), albeit with their priority emphasis on organization fitness and the self-awareness of the leader not evaluated as thoroughly. The motivation for Hughes Johnson to emphasize self-awareness is founded on the belief that approaching leadership must come from a customized design based on optimization and the failure of broad prescriptions in complicated and paradoxical organizations. According to her, self-awareness leads to an environment where all team members are self-aware, aiding in mutual awareness and optimization. As noted in the work, self-awareness has three components: your personalized value system echoing Kouzes and Posner (2017), the sense-making process from Weick (1995), and the inventory of practical skills of Block (1996).

The rest of the primary OS falls under the creation and need for trust and the discussion of leadership versus management. Hughes Johnson summarizes the need for trust by asserting, "Say the thing you think you cannot say" (p. 32). It is well known that psychological safety plays a crucial role in team members' ability to be honest and candid in open discussions, allowing for many benefits such as creativity and positive emergent behavior (Bradley et al., 2015; Edmondson, 1999; Majchrzak et al., 2012). The outlined process, however, abbreviates some steps in establishing trust specific to the time and consistency of individuals involved (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981).

Hughes Johnson resurrects Zaleznik's (1977) original meme of leaders being different from managers, where the context is often misplaced with leaders or managers having an advantage based on perspective. In the academic literature, this comparison is incomplete and paradoxical in many ways based on the process and complexity of the application (Hughes, 2016; Stacey, 2002). Often the words leader and manager are used interchangeably by writers, including the author in several portions of the book. The reality is that managers wish to become leaders as there is an expectation to do so referenced by the multi-billion-dollar leadership training industry of which Hughes Johnson is now part (Kellerman, 2012).

The motivation to elevate an individual regardless of judgment comes through the book more than any specific label regarding the actual or perceived differences.

Foundations

The foundational core framework establishes the need for foundational documents, the organization's OS, and a sense of the overarching leadership cadence. Hughes Johnson explains that the foundational documents start with the vision of the organization, followed by long-term goals and values. All three vital foundational documents are well known and established in the literature, with wide-ranging values of motivation and stability for internal and external stakeholders (Collins, 2011; Denison & Mishra, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Smaller components of an organization such as departments, teams, and groups may have different localized goals, yet the values will be the same as that of the entire organization, and the mission may or may not be derivative but complementary.

Hughes Johnson explains that the OS “. . . is a set of norms and actions shared with everyone in the company. These shared systems and parameters are essential to growth and success — keystones like an annual plan, quarterly goals, and regular communications. . .” (p. 83). The work provides several ideas of what an OS should look like with standard components yet contends that an organization must determine the foundational OS being adaptive for start-ups and established organizations. The focus on goals and metrics is significant as this lays a portion of the foundation for feedback discussed later. The cadence is simply the implementation and maintenance of the OS based on the timeliness and needs of the organization.

Hiring

Hughes Johnson does an excellent job explaining her philosophy behind the process of recruiting, interviewing, and hiring all different types of employees, including managers, based on the size and scale of an organization. She uses a pyramid analogy for the organization's hierarchical level of potential employees — as the pyramid narrows, the process becomes more focused and customized based on a single recruiting and hiring team where consistency becomes normalized. The organization's size may precipitate the need for a hiring agency or external recruiter; however, Hughes Johnson cautions that the external agency should never replace the hiring committee and the hiring decision maker, as hiring is part of every leader's job. The point here is that considering it is the leader who is ultimately accountable, they need to have the authority approve the final hiring decision based on the recommendations of the external agency.

Several best practices are offered around recruiting and hiring employees specific to the candidates' experience, potential complacency, quality of the previous employer, and a particular focus on the candidate's “. . . raw curiosity and signs of pure learning aptitude” (p. 211). Hughes Johnson offered additional best practices associated with the need for an up-to-date and accurate job description, the stakeholder mapping related to the hire, and the ability to decide and apply compensation efficiently and effectively. Regarding compensation — another topic not seen in many of the already referenced leadership books — she believes in set compensation and performance enhancements where higher salaries, arguably controversially, would be to change roles or leave the organization. The implication is that the importance of fairness and potential performance enhancements resonates with candidates in her experience in finality to the compensation discussion.

Team Building

From Hughes Johnson's perspective, team building and constant renewal are normalized based on the influx of new employees for scaling companies. She mentioned the works of Schein (1996) regarding culture, where the notion of norms and rituals will absorb the new employees as they work to understand the underlying meanings and the relationships between the team members and the overarching culture. Various types of teams are described explicitly focusing on missions or tasks and an introduction to an emergency team that supersedes all boundaries based on a temporary circumstance. She explains that both ultra-small and overly-extensive teams become suboptimal from a leadership perspective based on underutilized bandwidth and the extreme of overloaded bandwidth. The importance here is for the leaders and the organizations to seek and define the limits of optimally sized teams that will vary depending on the mission, task, and emergency.

With remote and cross-teaming also becoming very normalized in organizations, Hughes Johnson uses the analogy of competitive rowing specifically to create the boat as the mission and choosing the rowers to complete the job regardless of where they come from, for example, from other teams or departments. The leader must treat transient members as any other team member noted, as this emergence is not likely to recede anytime soon.

Feedback and Performance Management

As per Hughes Johnson, the first component of performance is to have some metric that can be compared and be as simple as productivity numbers to as complex as an annual skills assessment. The point here is not the metric as much as the intended feedback it provides to the leader as a means to optimize the overarching performance of the team and the individual team members. Hughes Johnson explains that managers fall between an extreme level of coaching at one end of the continuum and a laissez-faire approach at the other. She explains that most managers fall between the extremes and mostly fail because they wait too long to start the process or deprioritize the need based on perceived alternatives waiting for forced discussions via the cadence of a formalized performance review if the organization requires them in the first place.

The emphasis is the need for the performance management process essential to offer constructive observations being an important element team adaptation to a changing landscape. The feedback, also highly advocated by Hughes Johnson, needs to be fostered in both informal coaching sessions and formalized performance reviews, as they both serve to assist and grow the individual and the team. The additional advice she offers to the leader is not to be afraid of intuition and to see themselves as an explorer instead of an inquisitor during these feedback sessions using a positive tone to continue trust building.

Conclusion

Hughes Johnson produced this work as a long-term personal project of hers to serve potentially underserved areas, distilling her extensive expertise into the leadership domain. She was most successful, as noted, regarding the focus on self-awareness as a priority of the leader, often seen as relatively unimportant by many leadership authors rushing to focus on the more extensive organizational process. Her experience in recruiting, hiring, and compensation was novel from a generalized leadership perspective and, importantly, needed to understand that the motivation for the book is the scaling of an organization. The criticisms are somewhat minor with the memes associated with definitions of leaders and managers, as

this is both a contentious and complicated topic rife with passionate academic encampments of singular styles and popular heuristics. Many other thematic emergences in the book can be seen as popular notions of leadership such as personality tests, goal setting, and vision creation. Again, to create a complete textbook-like oeuvre, the common elements of leadership needed to be included. Ultimately, Hughes Johnson offers a refreshing read that many experienced leaders can use effectively to review the components they may find missing from their own self-awareness inventory.

References

- Axelrod, R., & Hamilton, W. D. (1981). The evolution of cooperation. *Science*, *211*(4489), 1390–1396. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.7466396>
- Block, P. (1996). *Stewardship: Choosing service over self interest*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bradley, B. H., Anderson, H. J., Baur, J. E., & Klotz, A. C. (2015). When conflict helps: Integrating evidence for beneficial conflict in groups and teams under three perspectives. *Group Dynamics*, *19*(4), 243–272. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gdn0000033>
- Collins, J. (2011). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies*. HarperCollins.
- Denison, D. R., & Mishra, A. K. (1995). Toward a theory of organizational culture and effectiveness. *Organization Science*, *6*(2), 204–223. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.6.2.204>
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *44*(2), 350–383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>
- Friedman, D. J. (2018). *Culture by design: 8 Simple steps to drive better individual and organizational performance*. High Performing Culture.
- Hughes, M. (2016). Leading changes: Why transformation explanations fail. *Leadership*, *12*(4), 449–469. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015571393>
- Kellerman, B. (2012). *The end of leadership*. Harper Collins.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2017). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations*. Wiley.
- Lencioni, P. M. (2010). *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Majchrzak, A., More, P. H. B., & Faraj, S. (2012). Transcending knowledge differences in cross-functional teams. *Organization Science*, *23*(4), 951–970. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1110.0677>
- McChesney, C., Covey, S., Huling, J., Thele, S., & Walker, B. (2021). *The 4 disciplines of execution: Revised and updated: Achieving your wildly important goals*. Simon & Schuster.
- Schein, E. H. (1996). Culture: The missing concept in organization studies. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *41*(2), 229–240. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393715>

Stacey, R. D. (2002). *Complexity and management: Uncertainty and the need to rethink management after the collapse of investment capitalism*. Taylor & Francis.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. SAGE Publications.

Zaleznik, A. (1977). Managers and Leaders Are They Different? Managers and Leaders. *Harvard Business Review*, 67–78. [https://ombuds.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/pics/30 Anniv/Managers and Leaders Are They Different .pdf](https://ombuds.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/content/pics/30%20Anniv/Managers%20and%20Leaders%20Are%20They%20Different.pdf)

About the Reviewer

Dr. Carl Lee Tolbert, Ph.D., is the Vice President of Engineering for B&D Industrial based in Norcross, GA. He spends his research time split between engineering development of new technology like cutting-edge Industry 4.0 sensors and the application of artificial intelligence in industrial automation systems. Dr. Tolbert's other main research interest is organizational leadership specific to phenomenological inquiry and the application of real-time ethnography through social media. He has been a guest speaker at numerous universities, industrial conferences, and major manufacturing corporations. If not writing or traveling, he spends time with his wife, Jill, at their home in North Georgia, enjoying the simple life of cooking and exploring the foothills of Appalachia.

Dr. Tolbert can be reached at tolbert@tutamail.com.