

REVIEWS

(Title) Narrating the Management Guru: In search of Tom Peters

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There was a time when Tom Peters could rightly be said not to be a mere human – he was, instead, a ‘climate of opinion’, representing a set of attitudes, ideas, problems and assumptions, in short a discourse, that dominated the actions and thoughts of managers. Nor was this discourse altogether separate from the pre-occupations of many management academics, especially those like myself interested in organizational culture and symbolism. Younger scholars may find it hard to appreciate how seriously Peters, and in particular the book that launched him, In Search of Excellence (co-authored with Robert H. Waterman), was taken at one point by the academy; older academics have probably long forgotten it. Yet, it is worth noting that this is a book cited more than 3000 times in academic journals since its publication, continuing to draw about 60 or more citations annually. Even if many or most of these citations are not favourable, it remains a considerably larger number than the 1600 citings of Gareth Morgan’s Images of Organization or the 1500 citings of Mintzberg’s Nature of Managerial Work.

David Collins’s book is an exploration of Tom Peters, his evolving message and the factors that account for his influence among practitioners and academics. Published to coincide with the 25th anniversary of In Search of Excellence, it is a book written with clarity, energy and passion. Collins is not content, as is currently fashionable, to ‘debunk’ Tom Peters; he wants to understand his man, one with whom he shares certain qualities. And understanding the man means understanding the times that account for the man’s moment of glory, his subsequent institutionalization and, as many would say, eventual decline. In short, Collins wants to come up with a Tom Peters story rather than a Tom Peters caricature. In his mission, he combines a sensitive examination of historical context with a close reading of Peters’ texts. While most academics, like myself, gave up reading Peters’ books at some point before or after Thriving on Chaos (1987), Collins has continued to read every single one of Peters’ books and, as we shall see presently, analysed all of them in revealing detail.

First, then, who is Tom Peters and does he matter? Why should academics take him seriously? Peters is usually thought of as the arch-management guru, the guru of gurus. But Collins is unwilling to treat him, as so many have done, as a mere signifier inviting deconstruction, debunking and critique. Starting with a detailed analysis of In Search of Excellence, a book that has

far outsold every other business best-seller and one that claimed to be based on proper social research, Collins considers various methodological and conceptual critiques and finds them lacking. Above all, he finds them lacking for failing to understand that the book's commercial success was due to the fact that it addressed the practical, emotional and even spiritual anxieties of corporate America in the early 1980s, when economic downturn at home was matched by the prospect of the ever-triumphant rise of Japanese business. The book, Collins argues, had a simple, yet plausible idea. Successful organizations, whether in Japan or elsewhere, share certain common practices and characteristics. Paramount among these are an obsession with quality, a fixation on the customer and a bias for action; these are all core dimensions of their cultural make-up. Leaders of successful organizations must not get lost in the detail of forecasts, procedures and routines but must concern themselves with managing the culture of their organization, with bolstering its values and creating meanings for their followers. It is for this reason that Peters has rightly been viewed as an apostle of cultural revolution by Andrew Chan and Stewart Clegg in their recent work (Chan & Clegg, 2007). His message, in a not too dissimilar way from that of Chairman Mao, was nothing less than the demolition of sclerotic, impersonal bureaucracy and its replacement by a flexible, innovative organization that placed values at the centre of the manager's focus. It was a message that played well with corporate America in its Sputnik moment, its moment of self-doubt and crisis.

Nor was it a message devoid of academic merit. Given the enduring interest in organizational culture, younger academics may find it hard, to appreciate the extent to which organizations until then had been viewed in profoundly anti-cultural terms. With some notable exceptions, like Barry Turner (Turner, 1971), Charles Handy (Handy, 1976), Karl Weick (Weick, 1979) and Andrew Pettigrew's rightly influential article "On studying organizational cultures" (Pettigrew, 1979), culture was almost a blind spot for scholars of organizations, immersed in studies of bureaucracy, motivation, systems, structure, institutional and contingency theories. Peters' and Waterman's book, even when criticized, had a considerable influence in re-orienting academics' interest towards cultural dimensions, including the creation and contestation of meaning through artifacts, narratives and stories and the emotional life of organizations. Peters and Waterman were at the forefront of raising culture's profile as part of what became a generalized attack on bureaucracy and a search for alternatives.

Peters and Waterman's book had no small influence in establishing stories and narratives as important and valuable features of organizational life. In this sense, they pioneered a new writing genre, one that relied for its persuasiveness extensively on the power and memorableness of its illustrations and vignettes. Told with passion through the pages of their book, these outweighed the other evidence they presented to support their arguments. Readers, both practitioners and academics, would remember the stories long after the arguments and formulas had faded away. Collins notes that in some other respects too, Peters and Waterman were intellectually ahead of their times; for instance, they appreciated the chaotic qualities of late capitalism and the need to move away from 'scientific' knowledge as the basis

of managerial decisions to something that would eventually become known as narrative knowledge. More importantly, as Collins demonstrates, the book marked a turning point in American conceptions of the corporation, helping to lionize the manager once more as the paragon of American business supremacy and success. Just as an earlier generation of Americans had idolized its astronauts as heroes in the battle against Soviet Union for technical and moral supremacy, Peters and Waterman cast the managers of their excellent companies as the heroes of America in its struggle against Japan. In this respect, it would be no mistake to see Peters as someone who, in the tradition of F. W. Taylor, reinvented the manager in line with the demands of his times. Could we find ourselves in a few decades talking about Petersism, I wonder.

Collins' tracing of Peters' subsequent writings make for interesting, if rather dispiriting reading. Peters emerges as a passionate man whose commercial and other success cannot mask an unending and failing struggle to replicate his early triumph. He becomes increasingly disillusioned with all corporate leaders and resorts to formulaic recipes, hype, gizmos, buzzwords or whatever will keep him in the limelight. His public performances as an inspirer of managers do not translate easily into inspiring prose, his numerous publications assuming increasingly the character of coffee-table books and objects of display items on businesspeople's shelves rather than forming the basis of a legacy for the training and education of future managers.

This is demonstrated through Collins' ingenious analysis of the ways that Peters used stories in his different publications. Collins identified over 700 narratives contained in Peters' works and examined in considerable details their plots, their emotional tone and their main characters. This required a formidable amount of close reading and textual analysis, but, as we shall see, throws up some fascinating insights. Collins relies on a methodology that I have proposed for studying stories (Gabriel, 2000) and offers a perceptive and balanced account of the ways in which my approach differs from those of other theorists of organizational storytelling, such as David Boje (Boje, 2001) and Barbara Czarniawska (Czarniawska, 1998, 2004), as well as the numerous ways in which our perspectives converge. One of these differences concerns my restriction of the term 'story' to narratives with characters and plots as against David Boje's emphasis on plotless, 'terse' narratives for which he offers the term ante-narrative. Collins' analysis reveals a fascinating change in Tom Peters' career as a storyteller. While his early books were brimful with lively stories with plots and characters, the total number of stories in his books declines substantially; the stories become more terse and elliptic, lacking a clear moral message and placing the author, Peters himself, as the central character. The hero of the guru's stories becomes the guru himself, just as the stories increasingly collapse into proto-stories, opinions and 'facts'. Instead of wooing the reader, Collins observes that Peters increasingly bombards him with narrative material with no convincing motive and no satisfactory ending. Collins offers, by way of illustration, some revealing examples of failing narratives from the work of John Steinbeck and Barbara Ehrenreich and draws the fair conclusion that Peters has lost the plot.

Collins' analysis of the narratives used by Tom Peters throws up one other fascinating feature – the total absence from his books of even a single romantic story, a story in which love, caring and tender feeling play any part. Instead, his books are full of epic stories relating great business achievements and successes with a small scattering of tragic and comic stories. The absence of romance reveals a crucial missing dimension from Peters' narrative universe. Collins essays several explanations for this absence of romance, which mostly reinforce each other. Romance, it seems, is not the currency of strong tough businessmen, of innovative mavericks or, more generally, of today's business where office romances are severely regulated and love features only as commercialized sentimentality. This is a hard and cold world, in which every person must stand up for themselves, must be prepared to reinvent themselves as a brand and must be willing to sever all links with the past in pursuit of a viable future. Thus, Collins observes, the curious similarity between Tom Peters' imagery of late American capitalism and that of authors like Sennett (1998), Uchitelle (2006) and others who have lamented the collapse of loyalty, trust and commitment from American business life and the concomitant rise of opportunism, cynicism and disillusionment. What to Sennett and Uchitelle reads like tragedy, to Peters continues to read as an invitation for epics – only the epics become increasingly hollow and difficult to deliver.

Collins's search for Tom Peters reveals two underlying narrative elements – first, the constancy of Peters' dominant narrative of late capitalism which offers no shelter for anyone and calls for constant change, reinvention, revolution and innovation and, second, Peters' sharp decline as a storyteller, someone who can mould hearts and minds through the powers narrative. Every bit as much as Max Weber abhorred the iron cage of rationality, whose chief apostle he was cast as, Tom Peters abhors the cynical, faddish and superficial dynamics that drive contemporary capitalism. Yet,

despite his protestations of disaffection, ... Peters appears as an ingratiating supplicant before the twin titans of liberalization and globalization. In an echo of Boxer, the tragically naïve, old work-horse [in Animal Farm], Peters announces "I will work harder" to become indispensable. (Collins, 2007, p. 141)

The second feature is that Peters' hard work cannot mask the continuous decay of his narrative resources. Storytelling is replaced by an evangelical rant that relies of exhortations, buzzwords, hype and threats. The guru has become a prophet, a prophet in a world which is not good enough for him.

Twenty-five years on from the publication of In Search of Excellence, Peters so often vaunted as the master of the moral tale, now offers 'terse narratives' of business. But like Boje's terse stories, these tales self-destruct because they lack 'performativity, memorableness, ingenuity and symbolism' (Gabriel, 2000, p. 20). They are all moral and no tale! And worse still – Peters, now, want us to see him as the hero of the hour!

This then is the tragic quality in Peters' own story created by Collins. Here is an enormously intelligent, imaginative and passionate man who started off with a genuine message for corporate America, one that seemed to resonate with the anxieties and fears of the times. He acquires celebrity status, growing rich, fat and, maybe a little lazy. Of course, he works phenomenally hard – he writes prolifically, he travels, he preaches and he rants, but he becomes narratively lazy. Like the magician, whose tricks become tired, he resorts to increasingly desperate tricks to maintain his celebrity status. As his audiences tire of him, his imagery becomes more apocalyptic, his rhetoric relies more on hype while his stories become more threadbare and his buzzwords fail to buzz. His early self-confidence seems to desert him. He shows signs of the same insecurity that he earlier observed in others. Of course, Tom Peters will not end up impoverished, nor does he risk losing his celebrity status as one of the world's leading gurus. But he is concerned about his legacy. And this is the tragedy – in his attempts to safeguard a legacy, he appears to do everything in his power to devalue it. Like other tragic heroes, he might have been better had he wrested on his laurels when his star was high; the more he casts himself as the hero of his stories, the more trivial his message and his stories become.

David Collins has delivered a gripping account of the Tom Peters story and, along the way, a very revealing illustration of the power and limitations of narrative in different discourses. His book is written with clarity, wit and the kind of no-nonsense approach that is a pleasure to encounter in an academic monograph. It opens with a genuinely touching personal story and is peppered throughout with good stories about which the author has thought hard. My only complaint is that occasionally he is content to offer a set of parallel explanations for a particular issue without weaving them into a coherent account. But this too may be a sign of the times, when the reader is allowed to make up his/her own mind about the final details of an argument.

Where does the book leave us? Does America need a new Tom Peters today? One suspects that America always needs its Tom Peterses, but this is a particularly opportune moment for one. A two-term presidency that brought disastrous military engagements, a gradual realization of the profound environmental catastrophes looming in the future, and, more directly, the rise of China as world economic superpower (which recalls the rise of Japan in the 60s and 70s, only with a tenfold greater population and with unconcealed military ambitions), all call for a new type of message. Whether the manager, celebrated and lionized by the gurus of the past, the entrepreneur, extolled by commentators more recently or some new type of prophet emerges to answer America's craving for heroes remains to be seen.

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