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# Samuel Culbert: The Magician’s Work on Organization Change

Walter Nord

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## Abstract

Samuel Culbert payed attention to his experience and made himself the consummate applied behavioral scientist. He is an almost five decade contributor of pathbreaking ideas, skilled in identifying management dysfunction and original in suggesting models of progressive organizational change. Combining a clinician’s eye with system analytic, inductive thinking, he constructs mid-level theoretical frameworks aimed at influencing frontline practitioners along with academically housed students of change. Always “outside the box” challenging conventional wisdom and mainstream practice, his contributions have been both methodological and substantive. His body of work combines an intense humanism with critical thinking that advances the state of knowledge.

This essay attempts to review the roots of his thinking, the essence of his work, and the muckraking advocacy stances he has taken. We see the progression of his thinking in his forthcoming book where he revises some of his previous assumptions about organizations, concluding that far more variables than previously thought must be engaged for the management mentality, mainstream in organizations, to appreciably change.

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## Keywords

Deep rooted humanism • Managerial dysfunction • Methodological innovativeness • Muckraking advocacy • Out of the box ideas on change • System analysis • Trans-organizational change

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## Introduction

Elsewhere (Nord 2016), I described Samuel A. Culbert as a *magician*. I did so because his work reminds me of the way Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg (1993) described the work of Werner Heisenberg, who was a great physicist. Weinberg commented that it is difficult to follow the reasoning of magician-physicists, who seem to “jump over all intermediate steps to a new insight about nature (p. 68).”

As I study Culbert’s work – as I have done for many years – I often come away thinking that his work is very much like magician-physicists. It is not magic that makes him one of the great thinkers of organizational change but rather his humanism and his way of reasoning that is made possible by a distinctive blend of skill sets that often lead him to profound insights and creative interventions.

I intend this chapter to be an intellectual biography and description of Culbert’s muckraking efforts to “make the world of work more fit for human consumption (Culbert 2017).” Throughout it, I will demonstrate how Culbert combines the eye and intuition of a skilled clinician, the big picture purview and inductive logic of a system engineer, and the phenomenologically attentive skills of the consummate action-researcher in his work. I know of no researcher with a stronger commitment to the implementation of humanistic values.

To put Culbert’s work in perspective, I begin with several general points I think useful background for understanding his investigative bent. Then I will chronicle his education and the formative professional experiences that led him to pursue a career-long journey studying the dysfunction that prevents people in organizations from realizing their capacities and dreams. I will then highlight the contributions he has made – first methodological and then substantive. Finally, I will bring the reader up to date on his legacy conclusions, which Culbert says came as a surprise. I will do my best to put it in sociological perspective, but it may take a while for the field to deal with. Enough said. Time to get on with Samuel Culbert.

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## General Points

To set the context for reviewing Culbert’s contributions to the study of organization change, several general points need to be made.

First, as Marrow (1969) wrote that Kurt Lewin “was concerned primarily with the actualities of men’s daily lives with one another,” the same can be said about Culbert. He has a curiosity about people – their social dynamics and why they interact and organize the way they do. Whatever you do, he wants to know why. Conversations with Culbert almost always turn into a conscious-raising experience, one where he makes you think. His writings reflect this, as well. For example, in his book *Mindset Management* (Culbert 1996), in which he sought to help people become more effective in helping others change, he asked the reader to consider, “What do you need to know prior to influencing people and giving them advice?” This led him to inquire about the mindsets of both the change agents and the person to be changed.

Culbert is a muckraker, often going against the grain of traditional thinking when it comes to organizational change and managerial practices. A great part of his work has been directed toward demystifying mainstream managerial practices and writing exposés that explain what is dysfunctional and the erroneous thinking that brought it about.

For 50 years he has affiliated himself with a university where, to this day, he works as a fulltime tenure-track professor and researcher. He told me, “The world of work is my laboratory where I have a consultant’s license to observe, inquire, and then to perturb and probe for deeper understanding.”

His work is trans-organizational. The phenomena and management practices he investigates and analyzes are not unique to a particular organization, industry, or locale. Rather, they are endemic in mainstream work culture. The same can be said for the remedies he prescribes which tend to be generic and highly adaptable to local culture considerations. In fact, the literature treats a paper Culbert copublished as the action research’s defining articulation of trans-organizational praxis (Culbert et al. 1972).

Culbert does more than just identify dysfunctional behavior and suggest corrections. He constructs midrange theoretical frameworks that allow people to understand what is erroneous in the thinking that led to the dysfunction and allowed it to persist unnoticed. He encourages people to revise their thinking and ways of operating and provides models of what revised practices might entail.

He often illustrates his frameworks and findings with vignettes and short-case descriptions selected to allow people to personally reference what he is describing and reflect on past and current experiences. In this way, Culbert wants others to independently validate for themselves what he has concluded.

Culbert presents his investigations and theoretical frameworks in layman’s terms. The use of non-jargon allows him to simultaneously target the two audiences he most wants to influence – practicing managers and students of organizational change. In this respect, he follows the trail blazed by several organizational change writers such as Manfred Kets de Vries, Edgar Schein, and Harry Levinson.

His work has an overarching theme of helping people overcome workplace-induced alienation – in the Marxist commodification sense (Marx 1908) – and to attempt removing freedom-constraining, workplace-manufactured fetishes (Nord 2016). Specifically, he has introduced concepts and ideas that address ways for people to increase consciousness about their lives at work and their

self-determination and voice. Many examples of this can be found throughout his work but are perhaps most frequently and powerfully stated in *Mindset Management* (Culbert 1996). As with all of his work, this book reflects values of the humanistic psychology propounded by Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and T-groups, especially the straight-talk relationship that enables people to improve their work effectiveness. For example, he observed how meetings in organizations are unproductive and unnecessarily long because of political posturing associated with the reluctance of people to express their interests openly and directly. This issue became a highlight feature in his work where he stresses the importance explicitly of recognizing the role self-interests play in organization processes and the value of people establishing straight-talk relationships for purposes of dealing openly with matters that, if they remain latent, lead to dysfunctional political processes.

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### **Influences and Motivations: Engineer Clinician Activist**

Culbert began his college studies in engineering at Northwestern University. Half-way through the program, he became interested in psychology and, by graduation, had accomplished what might be considered a double major. During his senior year, he applied for and was accepted into the doctoral program in social psychology at the University of Wisconsin. A month prior to graduating, he met and bonded with Bob Tannenbaum, a guest lecturer from the School of Business Administration at UCLA, who was presenting material from his groundbreaking book on sensitivity training for leaders (Tannenbaum et al. 1961). Sensing a harmony of purpose and spirit, Culbert withdrew his application at Wisconsin and applied to the clinical psychology doctoral program at UCLA, to which he was admitted.

While enrolled in clinical psychology, Culbert supported himself by working as a research assistant to Tannenbaum and eventually with James V. Clark conducting empirical studies in, at the time, the business school's state-of-the-art small group dynamics T-group laboratory. Culbert also performed all of the clinical psychology course work and internships, graduating in 1966 with what once again could be termed a double major. Board licensed as a clinical psychologist in 1967, Culbert chose to not pursue a clinician's career, saying that it was insufficiently dynamic for him. He wrote, "I was much more fascinated by the awareness, realizations, and life-changing experiences *normal* people were having in short-duration T-groups (Culbert 2016)."

While attending an eight-week postdoctoral internship at the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, he became noticed and was offered a 2-year contract working for the Institute. He was permitted to delay this assignment for a year so he could fulfill an assistant professor teaching commitment he had made to the business school.

His T-group training and system skills made him a natural for work at NTL. He was program director in the Center for Organization Studies and director of Intern Studies. Now, instead of leading T-groups, he was formulating and organizing professional development training and overseeing organizational consultancies in

which he participated, along with other theoretically inclined behavioral scientists. He worked with the likes of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Chris Argyris, Leland Bradford (who hired him), Charlie Seashore (who he says he did not “know” was his supervisor until Seashore mentioned it 25 years later as he was putting for a birdie at the Bethel Inn golf course), Roger Harrison, and scores of others. While working as staff on his initial NTL assignment, the eight-week program in which he had been a participant in the year before, Culbert developed a very close and lifelong friendship with Warren Bennis.

Two years later, when his contract was completed, Culbert was asked to continue at NTL. However, he declined the offer. When I asked why, he said, “I had too many unprocessed experiences to continue the action-packed NTL pace. I needed time to reflect and download my head.” After exploring academic positions at several universities, he decided to return to UCLA.

But the UCLA to which Culbert returned was not the same UCLA that he had left. He found himself more attracted to the system issues being explored by Eric Trist and others in the new Center for Quality of Working Life where he joined an international network of researchers, theorists, social activists, and industry leaders that, he said, “had taken action research to a higher order, trans-organizational plane.” Culbert found this discipline aligned with his attraction to the theory and social value commitments of Paulo Freire. The trainer/clinician was in the passenger’s seat observing the social scenery, and the system engineer was now in the driver’s seat heading for high-impact destinations.

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## **Key Contributions: Mid-level Theoretical Frameworks**

### **Methodological**

In an effort to pass along his magic, Culbert (2016) described how he conducts his muckraking, trans-organizational action research. He meticulously explained the thinking and behavioral processes involved. He detailed the process of turning passive research “subjects” into phenomena-insightful “informants” and then helping them transition into framework-building and validity verifying “coresearchers.” Step by step, he described the routines he uses in deconstructing dysfunctional organizational practices to reveal the erroneous assumptions on which they are based and inducing the system forces provoking them. This methodology caught my eye to the extent that reading his first book (Culbert 1974), I excerpted some of it in a book of readings of my own (Frost et al. 1978).

Specifically, he begins data collection by identifying organizational obstacles (e.g., managerial practices) that prevent people from being their best. He deconstructs the assumptions on which they are based to understand unspoken issues they tacitly address. Then, in step two, he seeks to demystify by exposing obstacles to effectiveness to enable those responsible for the obstacles, those whose performance suffers from them, and other interested parties, to see system elements they previously missed. Step three entails deconstructing system elements to uncover

problematic managerial practices that prevent people from performing their best. In step four, he provides a blueprint for replacing what is dysfunctional with liberating actions and systems, based on a humanistic view of people and their collaborative nature. In this context, step five conceptualizes a coherent theoretical framework that describes aspects of the system that need repair and validates it using real-life situations with which readers are apt to identify. Taken together, these steps enable him to link theory with finely nuanced life experiences and revised practice.

## **Specific Findings**

Culbert has made major contributions to the study of change through a series of eight book-length action research reports. Each book challenges some aspect of conventional wisdom. The best way to capture these contributions is to take a quick, much too short, look at each of these books.

### ***The Organization Trap and How to Get Out of It (1974)***

Immersed in the zeitgeist of the women's and minority rights movements of the 1960s and early 1970s which he wrote about in a McKinsey award-winning article (Culbert and Elden 1970), equipped with clinical and small group dynamics skill sets, and fascinated with Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1968), which he utilized in recent book (Culbert 2017, p. 129) "unlocking the past" thesis, Culbert explored the issue of over-socialization in companies. He was concerned about "organization traps" that limit a person's ability to comprehend the forces driving their personal decisions and career choices at work.

The outcome was a theoretical framework from which a five-step consciousness-raising strategy was derived. This is a model that people situated in any company can use, first to raise their awareness of organizational forces bearing on work-life choices and then to conceive of and evaluate the benefits of specific self-emancipating actions. The model extends Freire's self-determination through cultural awareness to personal conduct decision-making at work (Renshaw 1974).

### ***The Invisible War: the Pursuit of Self-Interests at Work (1980) and Radical Management: Power, Politics, and the Pursuit of Trust (1985), Both Coauthored***

These books take up the basis for the organization politics that are part and parcel of people working together seeing events so differently. It is based on Culbert's, and his coresearcher's, clinical awareness that self-interests are intertwined in every action an individual takes, in how people interpret any situation, and their self-convenient portrayals of events. It seeks to explain the inevitability of people constantly vying for self-convenient and advancing organizational frames. It speaks as a counterargument to people who eschew organization politics and the pernicious motivations they attribute to other people's self-convenient tilting of truth. The book presents a framework aimed at making sense out of what the authors describe as a natural and inevitable state of human affairs.

Central to the framework is the construct *alignment*: “The individualist way in which a person orients to work events. It reflects an individual’s attempt to maximize expression of the subjective, and the personally important, while producing work he or she believes the organization should receive from someone in his or her job and position (Culbert and McDonough 1985, p. 221).” Using this construct the authors introduce a format for people nonjudgmentally realizing the basis and inevitability of a person’s (one’s own and others’) distinctive way of thinking and acting. It makes bias, stylistic preferences, personal proclivities, and self-interested inclinations discussable and, sometimes, explicitly negotiable. The framework stipulates trusting relationships as the most effective tool available to any manager, especially when dealing with adversity.

### ***Mind-Set Management: The Heart of Leadership (1996)***

This manuscript was submitted with the subtitle “Making Management a Psychological Science Instead of a Manipulative Art,” which is descriptive of what Culbert set out to accomplish. At the time, the mainstream work culture lacked a means of nonjudgmentally characterizing inclinations, aversions, limitations, imperfections, and stylistic bias, all attributes Culbert considered organic in people’s conduct at work.

Prominently used in Culbert’s mind-set management framework is the terminology “reality is an artifact of the mind that views it.” It makes his message crystal clear: To insure the advice you offer someone is relevant to that person’s life and view of their workplace, you should first visit the organization in which that person works. Of course, the organization where a person works is inside that advice-receiver’s head and accessible through that individual’s mindsets. Culbert’s model stipulates how to access that organization, noun and verb.

A substantial contribution comes in the book’s inclusion of a refined alignment questionnaire, including detailed instructions for administering it. In addition, his framework provides guidance for accessing what’s unique in an individual’s perception of events, the meaning that person attributes to them, and identifying orienting mindsets.

### ***Don’t Kill the Bosses! Escaping the Hierarchy Trap (2001), with Coauthor***

The back dust cover succinctly describes the issues researched and reported on in this book. It states: “Boss-dominated relationships! What a strange state of affairs. After all that’s been said about the advantages of empowerment, participatory decision-making and teamwork, how is it possible that we continue allowing bosses to dominate and subordinates to fake acquiescence to the extent both do today? It’s a problem everyone knows about and few know how to fix.”

The book analyzed the use of hierarchy in organizations, concluding that while there are many highly functional applications of hierarchy, one major dysfunctional consequence goes unnoticed: the relationship perverting and trust destroying impact of “one-side accountable, boss-dominated relationships.”

The theoretical framework Culbert offered describes what is newly achievable in non-boss dominated, two-sided, and reciprocal-accountable relationships. He

deconstructs the construct “accountability” to identify the core problem in its conventional mainstream usage. He explains why organizations find it so difficult to get people to own up to mistakes and errors in judgment. Culbert asserts that accountability only becomes real when there are consequences. But in companies, consequences almost always entail punishment and denial of rewards – which makes people reluctant to acknowledge fault. Culbert presents an alternative – “lessons learned accountability” – and goes on to stipulate precisely what that entails.

Redefining boss/subordinate relationships to be two sided, his framework holds both parties accountable to one another and the company. The operative is accountable for getting organizationally needed results, and the boss is accountable for creating the circumstances for the operative to succeed in getting those results. When the outcome is not what it should be, the framework directs that both boss and subordinate stand lesson-learned accountable. The operative needs to learn what was needed and also realize why he or she did not already know it. The boss needs to learn what the operative lacked and why he or she did not realize it was lacking and provide it. Both need to learn what they should be doing differently and, in the boss’ case, learn how to prevent similar disappointments from other people in their jurisdiction.

### ***Beyond Bullsh\*t: Straight-Talk at Work (2008a)***

A career spent promoting authentic interpersonal communication in the workplace, Culbert was inspired by an essay defining the vernacular word “bullshit,” written by Princeton University philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005). Extrapolating to the mainstream world of organizations and collecting data, Culbert put forth a theoretical framework that conceptualized and meticulously stipulated the alternative to bullshit: straight-talk relationships.

Several noteworthy contributions are contained in the framework he put forth, starting with the realization that “Bullsh\*t has become the communications etiquette of choice in corporate communications (Culbert 2008a, p.9).” Describing the negative impact bullshit has on quality of communications and trust in relationships, he also pointed out many practical conveniences it serves, such as “how much more dangerous organization life would be without it.”

He then presented what is needed for *straight talk*, which his framework contended is not a moment-in-time episode but the character of a relationship. He extended his alignment theory “*to getting*” an individual to the extent that when viewing that person’s distinctive, seemingly aberrant, reactions and behavior, one could knowledgeably answer what Culbert calls the “Why (is) This (happening) Now?” question. With clarity he stipulates the conditions and processes required for evolving straight-talk relationships. He also describes how to recognize the circumstances and conditions when straight-talk relationships are not possible. His framework includes what Culbert believes is the hallmark variable in two-way expressive, relationship-building communications: *I-Speak*.

### ***Get Rid of the Performance Review! How Companies Can Stop Intimidating, Start Managing and Focus on Getting Results (2010) with Coauthor***

This was Culbert's all-out effort to rid the workplace of a dysfunctional practice he had been arguing against for 30 years (Culbert and McDonough 1981; Culbert and McDonough 1985; Culbert 1996; Culbert 2008b). Here is how the book's genesis is described on the Anderson School's website: "Articulating the theoretical framework suggested by his findings for the Academy of Management, Culbert was asked about obstacles to managers establishing straight-talk relationships with their direct reports – the people whose effectiveness they're out to enhance. 'Easy,' he said. 'It's the annual pay and performance review.' Following up, he wrote a *Sloan Management Review* paper that was reprinted in another journal, and that sparked a major change that's taking place mainstream today. What journal has that influence? On October 20, 2008, his paper titled 'Get Rid of the Performance Review!' appeared full-page in *The Wall Street Journal*. And that led him and his WSJ editor to write a very influential management book."

More than any other of Culbert's theoretical frameworks, it is possible to identify the impact this thesis has had on the world of work. At least partially as a consequence of his WSJ article – and the book two years later – hundreds, if not thousands, of companies have stopped giving annual pay and performance reviews. Unfortunately, as Culbert related it to me, in most instances, what companies have done is (Culbert's word) "shamful [sic]." He asserted, "Most have substituted alternative ways of 'objectively' evaluating, categorizing, and manipulating people." Tongue-in-cheek, Culbert said, "It's as if there's a cultural conspiracy aimed at preventing people from speaking their truths to people with power." Jumping ahead, his legacy book includes a vivid case study exemplifying the faux acceptance he sees taking place in companies today (Culbert 2017, pp. 143, 148).

Boldly, as is Culbert's style, he opened *Get Rid of the Performance Review* book saying, "It's time to put the performance review out of its misery (Culbert 2010, p.1)." Then, three sentences later, insuring readers got it, he added, "It's a pretentious, bogus practice that produces absolutely nothing that any thinking executive should call a corporate plus." He supported this view effectively and showed how a political process fueled by the latent self-interests of organizational participants sustains the existence of this practice. He proposed a far better approach – i.e., using performance *previews* instead of reviews.

This leads me to his forthcoming book, which he claims will be his final. While I have heard him say that before, I believe this time he really means it. Why? Because his puzzling and research took him to a surprising conclusion that up to now the change-management field has failed to acknowledge and would not face up to when another theorist postulated it.

## New Insights: How Work Culture Corrupts Good Intentions

Culbert's last book *Good People, Bad Managers: How Work Culture Corrupts Good Intentions* (2017) contains a breakthrough insight that I believe will be a major part of his legacy. I find the book magnificent, rooted in wisdom Culbert has advanced throughout his previous work. As before, he argued convincingly that organizations would be much better served by managers removing obvious barriers to any person performing his or her best. However – and this is where the surprise ending begins to unfold – somehow, even when they sincerely try, they fail. That is what Culbert has concluded, and he thinks now he knows why it happens. Here's how he put it:

“I'm sobered by a career spent exposing the negatives in mainstream good management practices, mistakenly assuming that well- intentioned managers would revise their erroneous ways once they realized the negative effect they were having. It's not that I've gotten much pushback about the dysfunction I've exposed, or disagreement about what revisions would be in everybody's best interests. Yet despite all the good intentions, little gets altered. Apparently, the practices I've been urging managers to revise are much too insidious and culturally embedded for any manager, or ad hoc group of non-top-level managers, to change on their own. (p. 64.)

He sees the impediments to change stemming from societal and workplace forces creating a need for pretense that leads success-driven managers to feel too insecure and self-protective to provide employees the focus and expression they need and deserve. Some of the forces reside in MBA education – what Culbert terms “Graduate Schools of Success.” He asserts that students are so focused on acquiring disciplinary knowledge that accrue to their own accomplishments that they do not develop the other-directed sensitivity skill sets required for the good management of others.

A few quotes from the forthcoming book help us see what he is up to:

“There's far more bad management behavior taking place today than the well-intentioned doling it out realize. . . and even more than those on the receiving end are aware of! There's little mystery about what good management entails; the biggest mystery is why people are calling this bad behavior ‘good enough.’” (p. 68)

“The root cause of most of the bad management behavior taking place today, to which so many well-intentioned managers are oblivious, is what the American work culture, en masse, has managers thinking incorrectly. (p. 12)”

Describing the problem:

“Too much of what the culture expects flies below most managers' consciousness – vaguely recognized, not engaged, and kept in place because managers are hard pressed to identify how they're being influenced. (p. 123)”

He adds,

“Personally, I’ve never been concerned about employees receiving enough feedback, and using what they thought accurate to improve as they were able. But consistent with the accounts I’ve been reporting in this book, there are plenty of reasons for worrying about managers having sufficient incentive to self-question, and to contemplate what’s dysfunctional in their relationships with employees. (p. 147)”.

“Stepping back, I see an unfortunate mismatch. Top level leaders have the means, but most won’t see gains sufficient to justify the effort required. (p. 153)”.

Consequently, the changes he has proposed throughout his career are a long way off, at best. In important respects, Culbert – after living his career advancing humanistic values – seems to have come out experientially where the great sociologist Alvin Gouldner came out, almost a half century earlier, from several decades spent analyzing structural incoherence in society.

I believe that Gouldner’s (1970) discussion of the role of sociologists in a capitalist society can help us understand the nature of the problem Culbert sees blocking individual emancipation in companies. Gouldner postulated that there is an underlying dissonance between “power” and “goodness.” From this perspective, the self-interests of individuals who hold power are furthered by actions that get them perceived as being good. In many respects, following the advice of applied social scientists that stems from the humanistic values driving Culbert – such as introducing progressive QWL practices and/or speaking favorably of any reformist change-management effort – can help leaders with power to be seen as doing good without actually giving up the power that implementation of the values associated with such programs might entail. In other words, their self-interests can be satisfied by the rhetoric and appearances these programs provide. Hence, the introduction of these programs – at least on a temporary basis – does not require them to actually give away power.

Similarly, it is possible that such partially committed efforts can satisfy the self-interests of the social scientists who champion them. For example, the acclaim and consulting fees that many of them gain from championing these programs may be all the reward needed. The situation may be analogous to that described by Gouldner when he wrote that some sociologists “live *off* sociology” rather than “live for it (Gouldner 1970, p. 15).” Thus, we are in a situation in which the self-interests of members of both audiences that Culbert has attempted to address may be satisfied by rhetoric and partial commitment rather than the full change Culbert sought.

Although I am confident that Culbert perceives the problem of the failure of the humanistic values to be sustained as his unfinished work, I am not confident that he agrees with my analysis of causes. However, I suggest that the process he highlights – how pursuit of self-interests by well-intended people can lead to dysfunctional results – is consistent with other theories he has proposed and that his muckraking orientation toward social science has been a reasonable extension of his analyses. Thus, the frame I have developed may be a “natural” extension of his thinking.

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## Legacies and Unfinished Business: Demystifying Pretense

Given what I have written so far about Culbert's forthcoming book, I conclude that it is a legacy book. It builds on insights Culbert has contributed over the years and shows how he is able to learn from his experience and challenge his earlier thinking.

By now it should come as no surprise that his legacy book challenges an aspect of conventional wisdom. What is surprising is that the conventional wisdom he is challenging used to be his own. Prior to writing it, Culbert – along with many change theorists of his ilk – believed that humanistic social scientists can, through careful study, uncover a number of dysfunctional practices and develop ways that can be implemented to overcome them without major cultural change. However, in this book, he said, "Not so fast." He is no longer optimistic. There are pervasive forces in our culture that inhibit a change in managerial mentality and nothing is going to change until those forces are dealt with.

Before concluding, something else needs to be said. The nature of Culbert's legacy will be different than those of most of today's academically unified social scientists. Culbert chose, for the most part, to create coherent theoretical frameworks that spoke to contemporary managers and professionals working in applied fields, as well as academic peers. This path has entailed two steps: use of applied phenomenological methodology that capture complexities and explain real-world experiences and publishing audience appropriate books rather than scholarly journal articles.

While this path did result in prestige and recognition from a somewhat narrow group of applied social scientists, it did not produce the academic standing of a Karl Weick or Bill Starbuck. On the other hand, Culbert's work has incorporated a coherent theoretical framework that has made him suitable for many academics in applied fields. However, I suggest that his attempt to formulate theory that captures the complexity of the phenomena he studied may have limited the popularity of his work with non-academic readers of the sort attracted to Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence*, or Jim Collins' *Good to Great*. In many ways these books simplify issues. In contrast Culbert combining of clinical and systems shows up the fallacy of such simplifications. This view is based on my personal judgment and experience which have lead me to use his books successfully with graduate MBA students, and a reluctance to use the more popular books with this audience. Thus, despite the value of his work, it appears unlikely that Culbert's legacy will include the great fame among popular audiences of Collins, Peters and Waterman, or a Weick among academic audiences.

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## Conclusion

Culbert has clearly made numerous novel and important contributions to the study of change. However, in addition to all of the insights and inductively developed constructs Culbert introduced during his career, he may be most remembered for the "sobering message" delivered in *Good People, Bad Managers*. The pretense needed for managers to enact what the work culture erroneously calls "good

management behavior,” the ethos of self-advancement and success, and the insecurity and dynamics that derive from what the work culture erroneously assumes stand in the way of people achieving what they could otherwise become. While this outcome is surprising, it is consistent with the messages of Culbert's *The Organization Trap* and Marx's expository writing on alienation: human beings create worlds for themselves that control them in dysfunctional ways. In his legacy book, Culbert said it this way: “It's as if managers have the cultural programming internalized to the point where, stranded on a deserted island and starting from scratch, they would recreate the very system that wrecks so much havoc for everyone, Especially themselves (p. 101).”

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## Further Reading

Culbert, S.A. with David Muir (downloaded 2017). <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/video/conversation-performance-review-11126992>

For much of his professional career, and up until a few years ago, Samuel Culbert believed bottom-up advocacy was a viable format for progressive organizational change. Still an ardent believer, recent insights have led him to a personal conclusion that more is needed. It is a nuanced outcome he always resisted. That is why his last book (in press, 2017) is an essential read for anyone interested in cultural progression and humanistic change management.

Intricately familiar with Culbert's recent methods article, *Transorganizational Muckraking: Method and Style* (2016), I find it must reading for every phenomenologically attentive researcher. When reading, I thoroughly advise taking your time. If you do, I believe you will learn to see a great deal that conventional researchers typically miss. Expose yourself to the origins and logic of his unique way of listening to people and getting to the basis of their truths.

If you would like to experience the passion and zest he puts into his public presentations, along with the humor he often inserts, watch the three-minute video he made for ABC News (downloaded 2017). For that matter, google his dozen or so NPR appearances, find the media articles he wrote (including two NY Times Op-eds.), and read what professionals in H.R. and O.D. have written about his work.