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A More Excellent Way Neal A. Maxwell

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Book Reviews

NEAL A. MAXWELL. *A More Excellent Way*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1967. 142 pp. \$2.95.

(Reviewed by William G. Dyer, professor of sociology at Brigham Young University. Dr. Dyer, a member of the editorial board of *Brigham Young University Studies*, has published and counseled widely in his field.)

This is a very good little book that is doomed, I fear, to "just miss." Neal Maxwell has written a very sensitive and thoughtful set of essays on the functions of the responsible leader-member in the Church; and, unlike many of the other Church books written about leadership, this has a much stronger anchoring in the stream of modern behavioral science. Maxwell has tried to mix the concepts of the behavioral sciences with the orientations of the Church—all in the language of the essayist—and it is this mixture that will probably cause it to miss all the relevant audiences.

The professionals in the field will find the essays much too Church related to capture their interest, and the book does lack any real reference to the research and contemporary theory in the field. Church members will probably lack the background to really grasp many of the basic ideas he presents. Those who will probably be most enthusiastic about this book will be those Church members with degrees in the social sciences who hold positions in the Church. These are certainly limiting conditions.

This is no how-to-do-it book, and the person who reads this in order to get ten easy rules for running Church meetings will certainly be disappointed. Maxwell himself is an experienced Church and organization administrator with solid experience in current leadership training. He offers no easy solutions to the complex problems of improving the effectiveness of Church leadership, for there are none. This is one of the weaknesses of the essays, for while the author discusses, with insight, some of the dilemmas of the Church leader and some of the hopes for improvement, he offers no real direction. Our current programs of action-learning do tell us some things that we could

begin to do to improve the quality of leadership, but Maxwell stops short of defining any concrete steps that could be taken. He tells us that an effective leader should be more open and candid, gather more accurate data, be more sensitive in rewarding and punishing, plan more effectively for change. With all of this I agree, but what should we do to get started? How can we assess where we are now? One of the great problems is that many of our Church leaders think they are already like this when in fact they may be very closed, rigid, resistant to change, and insensitive. I fear that many a Church leader will read Maxwell's essays and say to himself, "Maxwell is right. He describes what a leader should be, and that is the way I am"—and then will go on to continue in his same inadequate style.

In many of the essays there is a strong emphasis given to the importance of giving and receiving "feedback"—that is, finding out from others our impact on them. But this book does not show or tell us how to begin this process. However, at least this volume recognizes the importance of this process and emphasizes it again and again, and all the research I read on the improvement of behavior clearly states this is a fundamental condition in the process of change. Certainly we need more open and honest communication in the Church. Leaders in the Church need to be more receptive to the feedback of members, to encourage and solicit this information; and people should learn to share information without feeling guilty or that they are "bad" or heretical if they share data in the spirit of trying to help to improve.

There is one part of the section on "problem solving in small groups" where four "exercises" are presented as examples of ways youth workers might begin a dialogue with each other. Just exactly how and when one might use these exercises is not explained, but it is obvious that Maxwell has given some thought about how to implement some of the ideas developed in his essays. It is hoped that he might in the future prepare a manual of action-steps that leaders might follow in carrying out the directives this book develops.

A More Excellent Way calls for a type of leadership behavior that is consistent with current behavioral science findings and the spirit of the gospel, but one that is at variance

with much of the current practice in the Church. Maxwell feels that the leadership pattern in the Church should be a combined participative and directive mode. The effective Church leader would be accepting and trusting of others, allow people to be different and not expect pure conformity, and be open and candid with others and encourage them to be open with him. He would involve people in making decisions and develop commitment out of involved participation rather than by appeals, threats, or commands. All this is exactly on target in terms of current leadership theory and wonderfully consistent with the teachings of the Church. It is hoped that we can truly develop a type of sensitive leadership throughout the Church consistent with these formulations.

The style of these essays is much more literary than scriptural or scientific. One will find as many quotations from C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, John Gardner, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Abraham Maslow as from the writings of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or the scriptures. This literary touch was appealing to me, but some may prefer the more objective approach of the social scientist or the scripturally-based approach of the theologian. *A More Excellent Way* presents sensitive and thoughtful essays, and I hope that my prediction that this book will "just miss" proves to be false.