

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Unauthorized Progress, Leading from the Middle: Stories & Proven Strategies for Making Meaningful Impacts

Captain Geoff Abbott, US Coast Guard (Retired), Burke, VA:
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Geoff Abbott spent 33 years as a U.S. Coast Guard officer, where he commanded at various levels and led his service's Performance Excellence Program and Commandant's Innovation Council. He currently serves on the faculty of the Securities and Exchange Commission's College of Leadership Development. These experiences prepared him well in developing techniques for creating positive change in organizations. In *Unauthorized Progress*, Abbott provides concrete advice and effective tools for leading innovation.

Unauthorized Progress is not about breaking rules, but instead focuses on "taking action on the many excellent ideas people have to help achieve goals the organization may not yet recognize, or lags in implementing." (p. 7) Although the book's title refers to "leading from the middle," Abbott's insights really apply to any level of leadership and any position. In essence, Abbott's book provides the reader with a systematic guide about how to create, communicate, and implement innovation in any type of organization.

The first section of the book details methodologies for defining a leader's skill set in creating change and then for deciding which new ideas have the greatest chance for success. Abbott employs Albert Humphrey's tried and true

“Strengths-Weakness-Opportunities-Threats” analysis method as well as an “Importance vs. Urgency” matrix to predict success of the new idea. He then explains evaluation criteria that senior leaders use in evaluating proposals for change and provides suggestions for using this information to build your own case. Discussions about risk considerations and understanding the key players in your organization —“don’t minimize the impact of nay-sayers; understand their concerns and issues” (p.50)—round out the second section.

Section three offers advice on implementing new ideas, likely the most valuable section of the book. Here, Abbott addresses potential areas of implementation failure, focusing on how innovators can avoid these possible setbacks. Innovators need to be experts in their new initiatives, skillfully market their concept, and understand competing ideas and risks. If failure occurs during the initial implementation of a new idea, innovators need to rapidly react to mitigate negative effects, and the author provides those mitigation strategies clearly and effectively. I loved his suggestion to use Toyota’s “Five Whys” approach to getting to the essence of failure causality; keep asking why successively until you find the underlying reason for failure. (p. 101) This section closes out with a discussion of measuring performance and using metrics to make improvements.

Throughout the book, Abbott provides real-world examples from his many years of working with the U.S. Coast Guard, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and Department of Homeland Security. These vignettes clearly illustrate the main concepts throughout the text. He also brings in less familiar methodologies from other sources, such as the “Risk = Threat x Vulnerability x Consequence” model from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that he adapts to leading change. Here, Abbott turns the DHS risk model on its head to create an “Opportunity Model,” which considers total potential benefit and probability of success, with the latter based on intent and capability. (p. 60)

There is no index or bibliography in *Unauthorized Progress*, but Abbott mentions several leadership and management scholars in the text. This is not, after all, an academic work but an extremely readable guide to creating positive change in organizations. Excellent tables and figures assist the reader with visualizing many of Abbott’s important concepts.

There is a strong demand for studying and implementing innovation across all domains, whether in business, defense, sports, or academia. Air Force Chief of Staff General C.Q. Brown’s call to “accelerate change or lose” is but one example. Innovators should take a close look at Abbott’s *Unauthorized Progress* to deepen their thinking about how to implement change successfully.