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Book review: A Kleiner 2003, Who really matters: the core group theory of power, privilege and success

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Once every few years, a leadership or management book emerges that really tells it like it is – that spells out in a clear and succinct way what we all know to be intuitively obvious in organisational life but did not have the insight or words to articulate ourselves.

As an “organisation watcher” who is interested in both how organisations function and in the people who can make things happen in organisations, I found *Who Really Matters* to be a refreshing explanation of influence and energy that drives modern organisations.

Art Kleiner argues that the every decision in an organisation is propelled by the desire of organisational members to satisfy, not the customer or consumer, but the perceived wants and needs of the leaders of the organisation – the core group.

The composition of the core group is said to differ from organisation to organisation but usually consists of the most senior members of the organisation, its leaders at the pinnacle of the organisational hierarchy. But having senior status in the organisation does not necessarily mean membership of the core group. Membership can extend well down the organisational hierarchy to key others who are influential without having formal power.

Leaders of organisations have long recognised the importance of vision and mission statements to articulate clearly to organisational stakeholders the future aspirations of the organisation's leaders, and most organisations now have formal vision and mission statements in place. In general, vision statements articulate the broad conceptualisation about where the organisation desires to be in its ultimate destination. Mission statements, on the other hand, are meant to be different from vision statements, and are about the more immediate future and usually delineate the organisation's reason for existing. Most, if not all, of these corporate statements define the role of the organisation to be fundamentally around serving the organisation's customers or clients.

Kleiner argues that there is usually a wide gap between an organisation's declared vision and mission statements and what actually happens in the organisation. He argues that despite the declared statements about the importance and role of the customer, almost everything done in an organisation – from which projects are approved, who gets a promotion, where money is to be spent – is affected by the way organisational members perceive the wants and needs of the core group.

He argues that rather than people in organisations consciously or unconsciously operating from a position of “what is in the best interest of the customer” as a benchmark for actions or decisions, that organisational members instead use “what would so-and-so (a member of the core group) think of this” as the real benchmark for

decisions and actions. The perceived wants of core group members therefore dominate the organisation's thinking and actions and the organisation pivots to meet what it thinks core group members want.

Is it any wonder then, that to casual observers of organisations, it is sometimes difficult to make sense of many of the actions that organisations take or to understand how organisations can get so far off the rails? This book will aid in the understanding of this phenomenon.

In the book, Kleiner outlines ways in which the core group's real mission can be identified by observing core group members' day to day actions and the fundamental messages the core group sends out to the rest of the organisation.

If you aspire to be a member of the core group or just want a practical and realistic understanding of how power works in organisations, then Kleiner's advice and insights will be a valuable addition to your organisational observation repertoire.