Book review of "Parallel Learning Structures: Increasing Innovation in Bureaucracies" by Gervase R. Bushe and A. B. (Rami) Shani, published by Addison-Wesley, Wokingham in 1991 (ISBN 0 201 52427 9

Mairi Gudim, University of Paisley
Robert van der Meer, University of Strathclyde

This book is in the Addison-Wesley Series on Organization Development (OD), which is edited by Richard Beckhard and Edgar Schein. If asked why a book on OD should be reviewed in a Journal of Operational Research, we would suggest that the growing interest in 'soft' OR, with its focus on problem-solving methods for complex and 'messy' problems, requires the OR practitioner to address organizational issues as they affect the problem solving process and the management of change. 'Parallel Learning Structures' illustrates one method of dealing with these issues.

The book is based on the premise that understanding of organization design is essential for large, organizational change efforts. It advocates the use of technostructural intervention, or Parallel Learning Structures (PLSs), as a means of ensuring the success of such change efforts. These strategic interventions are viewed as a means of addressing the fundamental paradox between the organization's need for structural predictability and stability as compared with the requirement for structural adaptability, by aiming to promote system-wide change whilst retaining the advantages of bureaucracy.

A PLS aims to change the technology and/or structure of the organization, with the purpose of improving the organization's socio-technical system. This is achieved through installing a second structure (composed of a steering committee and a number of small groups), which is designed for learning, and which emphasizes creating norms and procedures that facilitate learning and innovation. Somewhat tenuous distinctions are drawn between PLSs and, say, task forces and teams; whereas the semi-autonomous work group is given as an example of a PLS in action. The book continues with a set of prescriptions for the simultaneous pursuit of efficiency and innovation; and with an explanation of why bureaucracies find 'messy' problems hard to handle (the bureaucracy is based on functional specialisms, whereas the PLS emphasizes an integrative, cross-functional approach to problem-solving situations). Great emphasis is laid on the development of problem solving skills, and on the importance of power equality among PLS members, irrespective of status within the learning structure. Several examples of PLSs in action are given; and the book concludes with a discussion of seven metaphors for organizational change.

The examples of PLSs in action are interesting and informative; and the book provides a fair (but already well-documented) description of the difficulties associated with solving 'messy' problems within the confines of a bureaucratic structure. Nonetheless, its appropriateness for use by the 'soft' OR practitioner must be qualified by the following observations. First, although the socio-technical approach (based on the Human Relations philosophy of Mayo *et al.)* has recently regained popularity with the onset of JIT production systems; the old criticism that the approach ignores constraints imposed on behaviour other than those related to the task (for example economic constraints), still prevails. Second, the examples of PLSs quoted inform the reader of what the author judges to be the 'best fit' between technology and design without giving information on other possible 'matches' for comparison. Third, we are a little dubious about the difficulties associated with being part of a technostructural intervention which involves learning but not implementation.

On a practical level, the wherewithal required to support such a venture may not be available; and indeed the book concludes by acknowledging the time and money involved in supporting the PLS. More importantly, however we would suggest that improvement activity in the organization can unite routine management and managing for innovation in one set of organizational arrangements and practices; and that far from detracting from the effectiveness of the innovation process, the linkage is likely to produce

universally better results (e.g. Hill[1]). Despite our reservations, we conclude that for the 'soft' OR practitioner, the book provides a useful insight into organizational issues associated with the management of change.

1. HILL S. (1991). Why quality circles failed but Total Quality Management might succeed. *British J. Ind. Rei.* 29, (4) 541-568.