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# **Managing Public and Nonprofit Organizations: Stories of Success and Failure by Charles Coe**

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Coe, C. (2018). *Managing public and nonprofit organizations: Stories of success and failure*. New York, NY: Routledge. \$44.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-138-06486-7

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When a curriculum is relevant, students are motivated to learn (Kember, Ho, & Hong, 2008). In his new book, *Managing Public and Nonprofit Organizations: Stories of Success and Failure*, Dr. Charles Coe provides a resource for making public management education more relevant to students. The book comprises a collection of stories taken from the headlines illustrating successful and unsuccessful efforts to put management theory into practice. Through these stories, the author seeks to underscore the importance of public management principles and best practices.

Guided by the question, “What can go wrong?” the author presents stories with the expressed intent of preparing readers to anticipate and prevent future public management failures. Each story illustrates the importance of principles and best practices to organizational performance. While stories of success are included, the book emphasizes stories of failure as cautionary tales, i.e., examples of the consequences of violating principles and straying from best practices.

The author organizes stories by managerial concept and function. The book includes two managerial concepts (organizational structure and organizational culture) and seven managerial functions (performance management, financial management, human-resource management, procurement management, policymaking, capital management, and information technology management), each receiving treatment in a separate chapter. The author divides each chapter into a set of principles and best practices, endeavoring to provide at least one example for each principle. This effort is unique in that, rather than presenting a few detailed cases to illustrate theories, the author presents 120 short vignettes within the book’s 167 pages.

The book begins with an introductory chapter outlining its purpose, the methodology used to select topics and examples, and a brief review of research on successes and failures. The author

identified stories by searching through *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Raleigh News and Observer* over a four-year period. Additional stories were taken from government reports, books, and other periodicals. Examples of stories include the attacks on 9/11, response to Hurricane Katrina, and the siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, TX. The chapter concludes with a cursory review of research on government successes and failures.

Chapters 2 through 10 examine each of the management concepts and functions in turn. For each chapter, the author provides a brief description of key principles and practices as well as simple summaries of the researched knowledge supporting each principle. The chapters include stories illustrating the successful or unsuccessful implementation of a principle. Throughout the book, all but three principles and practices have accompanying stories. Each chapter concludes with discussion questions intended to “prompt discussion as to how failures happened, how they could have been prevented, and how to replicate successes in other jurisdictions” (Coe, 2018, p. 5).

By design, the stories are presented without the level of detail included in a case study. The lack of detail places several additional demands on the reader. For instance, the stories and commentary imply cause–effect relationships between failure (success) in applying a principle and the situation illustrated by the story. The text rarely supplies evidence in support of these causal relationships, thus placing the burden of proof on the reader. In addition, the stories and commentary do not always connect the illustration to organizational outcomes. For example, the author includes the story of General David Petraeus’ sharing classified information with his mistress to illustrate a failure of organizational culture. The story is presented, however, without an explanation of the link between the general’s behavior and the organization’s culture. Lastly, the lack of detail is likely to inhibit meaningful discussion of post-chapter questions without additional research by students and instructors.

While well written and readable, the text suffers from poor editing. Several typographical errors occur, drastically altering or obscuring the presumed intent of the author. For example, in Chapter 8, when discussing the effects of pollution in the Flint River, the text reads, “When lead leaves the blood, it stays in one’s blood forever” (Coe, 2018, p. 133). In another instance, the text suggests, “The organization should therefore strongly encourage and reward unethical and illegal activities...” (Coe, 2018, p. 98-99). In addition to typographical errors, there is at least one factual error. When discussing pensions and other post-employment benefits, Chapter 6 reads, “Once prevalent, the DC [defined contribution] method is now superseded by the DB [defined benefit] approach, which costs the employer less” (Coe, 2018, p. 93). The reverse, however, is the case with employers replacing defined benefit with defined contribution plans due to the lower cost. These errors can lead to confusion among readers unfamiliar with the topics of discussion.

Despite its limitations, the text provides an excellent reference for instructors searching for real-world examples of key public management concepts and engaging questions for classroom discussion. It is a timely and concise supplement to any standard public management or organizational behavior textbook. The tables cross-referencing each story with the principle it illustrates and mapping the examples to NASPAA’s Universal Competencies are useful for quick referencing and curriculum development. This collection is a much-needed resource for public administration educators searching for illustrations to enhance student learning.

## **Disclosure Statement**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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## **Author Biography**

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