

Howard Aldrich. **Organizations Evolving**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999, 413 pages, softcover.

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Howard Aldrich has not written a "delightful" book, nor one that is "charming." In fact, the most fun part of reading *Organizations Evolving* is looking for (and likely finding) your name in the mammoth reference section that takes up over 10% of the book. Nevertheless, the patient organizational scholar can expect a rich payoff from reading, and more

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important, reflecting on Aldrich's serious look at organizations through an evolutionary lens.

As a strategist and historian, I picked up this book with skepticism driven by my own set of prejudices. On the one hand, I had to applaud anyone who staked out the position that studying organizations over time mattered, a lot. Still, the idea of evolution for me has always conjured the image of worlds colliding, with little room for entrepreneurial spark or individual initiative. Could this book possibly cover, as Aldrich claimed, "all organizations, not just the largest and most powerful ones... the emergence of organizations, not just their existence... [and] the process through which new organizations, populations, and communities emerge, using an evolutionary approach that cuts across academic disciplines" and still have room for people? I had my doubts.

I started the book with my own litmus test in mind. I had studied a retail organization that began in a 25 × 60 square foot space, with \$195.26 in first-day sales. Fifteen similar-sized, similar-organized competitors opened around the same time and served the same small, but growing market. Another 50 enterprises competed at the margins. Within a decade this organization had become the largest retailer in its region and in the state, surpassing niche players, specialty retailers, and general merchandisers in every category of sales. Those firms that had looked and acted most like this firm had long since disappeared. I considered the emergence of this firm a complex and multifaceted story that included an ambitious and astute entrepreneur, a dynamic and receptive economy, an appropriate and adaptable strategy, and sound decisions about staffing, marketing, merchandising, and financing that fit the times and local conditions. Could Howard Aldrich's framework explain, on more than a general level, the emergence and success of an organization, the failure of others, and the unremarkable survival of still others?

The answer was yes, though not in the way that a historian or strategist would. At a very high level, *Organizations Evolving* is about variation, selection, and retention. Within that framework, Aldrich manages to find room for more than just the ecological perspective. He identifies the explanatory value of institutional, interpretive, organizational learning, resource dependence, and the transaction cost economics perspectives for the topics he studies. He also turns frequently to understudied populations, citing works on not-for-profits, small and medium-sized firms, and firms outside the United States to buttress his arguments. This variety of research point of view and evidence sources adds credence and legitimacy to his conclusions.

For me, the most interesting and illuminating sections of this book were those that addressed emerging organizations. Here Aldrich deserves much credit for stitching together literatures that aren't usually

proposed together. Without discounting entrepreneurs, Aldrich places their contribution into the context of network analysis, social psychology, and cognitive psychology to explain how the founding process may work. This leads to a much more interesting set of questions about whether business founders rely more heavily on known, and thus imitated routines, or whether they invent and innovate their way to success. This question leads to a larger one, with respect to long-term success. How can organizations legitimize their behavior and practices? To answer this question, Aldrich delves into boundary definition, recruiting, and the building of communities of practice. The answers are often paradoxical. Emergent organizations must build unique strategies and competencies that set them apart from others, and simultaneously build connections with and similarities to others within their population and communities.

In contrast with the chapters about emerging organizations, the one about organizational transformation rings less true and seems forced at times. For instance, why is the example of Reed College's founding included in the study of transformation, rather than foundings? Later in the chapter, the description of culture clash within a Japanese-owned firm operating in Italy did not support Aldrich's arguments as well as his examples in other chapters, and I questioned how well many of his examples related to the larger theme of evolution that he had posed.

The book was back on solid footing when Aldrich turned his attention to populations and communities. Here his arguments about commensalism and symbiosis clarified the paradoxical notion that organizations must always find ways to compete and cooperate. Context, which is often ignored or controlled for by organizational scholars, takes a prime position in explaining the dynamics of populations and community emergence and survival.

In a book this large and wide-ranging, it is difficult for a reader to assess how well the author has covered the multiplicity of topics and literatures. Business historians other than Alfred Chandler get few mentions, though Aldrich's plea to look at the details of nascent entrepreneurial behavior and emergent organizations might find its answer in well-researched company histories and business biographies. He also gives mention to topics that strategists contend are important, but does not usually use the specialized language or literatures of that discipline. These examples, however, are picky and unique to my training.

Overall, *Organizations Evolving* does what it sets out to do—examine “the multilevel development of organizational forms and assess the impact of these on innovations.” Readers who jump into this book looking for the Darwinian imperative as it applies to organizations will be disappointed. Instead, they will find a scholarly and practical guide to understanding the dynamics at work inside and outside organizations. Reading

it is neither easy nor quick. Each chapter builds upon the previous ones. Lines of arguments run in parallel, sometimes dipping and curving. In the end, if you have paid attention, you will understand that Aldrich's invitation (which he ends with in lieu of a traditional concluding chapter) is nothing more than an exhortation towards radicalism. Just as organizations evolve, so must our approach to studying organizations. Aldrich is not asking for the same old-same old. For me, that discovery made the book worthwhile.