

COB Review by Roger Lirely

Title: “Many Unhappy Returns—One Man’s Quest to Turn Around the Most Unpopular Organization in America”

Author: Charles O. Rossotti

Publisher: Harvard Business School Press

Length: 330 pages (includes appendix and bibliography)

Reading time: 7-8 hours

Reading rating: 10 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

I was wrong about this book. When I realized that the deadline for my submitting a book review was about a month away, I began to look for something to read. It’s often difficult for a “tax guy” to find something of general interest, so my goal was to find something that had educational value to me as a tax professional but that I could sell to the reading public as a decent book to read. I got much more than I bargained for with “Many Unhappy Returns: One Man’s Quest to Turn Around the Most Unpopular Organization in America” by Charles Rossotti.

Charles Rossotti was appointed Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service in 1997 at a time when the IRS was perceived as being abusive toward taxpayers and under intense pressure from every branch of the government to change the way it did business. A Harvard MBA and corporate executive, Rossotti had no tax experience and was the first Commissioner who came from the private sector.

His story is a fascinating recount of leading an organization through change, and not just any organization. At the time of his appointment, the IRS served 132 million individual and 6 million business taxpayers, employed 100,000 people and collected 95 percent of the government’s revenue using 132 separate computer systems and 1960s programming. Y2k was less than three years away. The IRS had just spent \$4 billion on modernizing its information technology systems and had nothing to show for it.

Rossotti set about first to change the philosophical bent of the IRS—to get employees and the government to view the IRS as in the customer service business rather than the enforcement business. His rationale was that the IRS is the only organization in America that conducts financial transactions with every adult over her entire lifetime, her estate after death, every business every month, even if the business goes bankrupt, every pension fund and almost every charity. These financial transactions exceed \$2 trillion per year and must be accurate to the penny.

Rossotti, a Republican appointed by a Democratic White House, oversaw the writing of a new mission statement, a complete organizational restructuring, Y2K, systems modernization and 9/11.

The book is replete with anecdotes of Rossottis’ run-ins with administration officials, congressional committees and members, union officials, taxpayers, the media and leaders

from business and industry. He tells these stories without much self-aggrandizement and entertainingly. They are interspersed at well-paced intervals that keep the reader interested.

Every reader, but especially those whose lives involve managing organizational change, will take something away from this surprisingly enjoyable read.

Roger Lirely is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Accountancy, Finance and Entrepreneurship in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books visit our Web page at www.wcu.edu/cob/.