

College of business Book Review by Paul Jacques

Title: My Secret Life on the McJob

Author: Jerry M. Newman

Publisher: McGraw-Hill

Copyright: 2007

Price: \$24.95 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-0071473651

Length: 240 pages

Reading time: 3-6 hours (depending on one's reading skills and reading objectives)

Reading rating: 8 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall Rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Subject areas: Leadership, hospitality, fast food

One large segment of the labor market consists of individuals working in the fast food segment which includes organizations such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, fast food employed over 3 million employees as of 2006. Projections are for this already large group to expand as the demand for labor in the fast food industry is projected to increase by 17% by 2016.

Among the distinct characteristics of fast food labor as compared to labor in other industries are that educational requirements are low and that the workforce is disproportionately young with 20% of workers being between 16 - 19 years of age. Laborers in this industry have diverse employment objectives and consist of individuals who are either: positioning themselves to build a career in fast food, desperately hanging on to what some consider being a low-tier job, on a stopping point on destinations to other jobs, or aimless with no apparent goals at all. Turnover in fast food industry jobs regularly exceed 200% meaning that virtually everyone has left employment in a given job within six months of hire.

Author Mr. Jerry M. Newman is a University Distinguished Teaching Professor for the State University of New York at Buffalo and he began his research for this book with the objective of understanding the phenomenon of managing in an industry that by nature has low profit margins and where cost control is the imperative. To that end, Mr. Newman traveled to the East, Midwest, and South to secure employment behind the counter at various burger chains with a nationwide presence. While the scope of his employment was modest, he maximized the utility of the experiences by employment stints by selecting different chains, and different franchisees within a given chain so as to gain information about the relative influences of corporate headquarters, franchise owner, and individual store management.

While some may consider Mr. Newman's story to be merely anecdotal, his message has a universal applicability to leadership as it is not only consistent with rigorous studies spanning a wide variety of contexts in current leadership research, but it is also much

more entertaining. In addition, Mr. Newman presents many useful conclusions that transcend industry type and that are relevant to the day-to-day leadership of employees everywhere.

The overarching conclusion promoted by Mr. Newman is that even in an industry where standardized procedures are ubiquitous thereby reducing the impact of shop floor leadership, leader skills can still be brought to bear on a number of factors that together have a major influence on the overall success of each employee and franchise location in the study. Mr. Newman's story serves as a reminder that even in a climate where supervisors have little discretionary resources to leverage as potential rewards, one's leadership style can serve as a potent force to positively motivate his/her subordinates. Suggestions presented are to: select employees whose profile suggests reliability and that fit well within the current work environment, provide formal and informal training using a personal approach for these employees, ensure the safety of the work environment, be open to subordinate's suggestions and respect the idea that subordinates' expertise/understanding of tasks in their own specific domain may exceed your own, verbally offer positive reinforcement/recognition for desired behaviors, provide opportunities for development of group cohesion, and be tolerant of the fact that everyone represents a unique perspective.

Overall, leadership principles that Mr. Newman found leads to success in the fast food industry are indicated for leaders who wish to achieve high levels of group performance in any context.

Dr. Paul H. Jacques is an Assistant Professor of Management and International Business in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. Dr. Jacques' body of research includes leadership, personality, and social psychology. For previously reviewed books, visit our Website at [www.wcu.edu/cob/](http://www.wcu.edu/cob/).