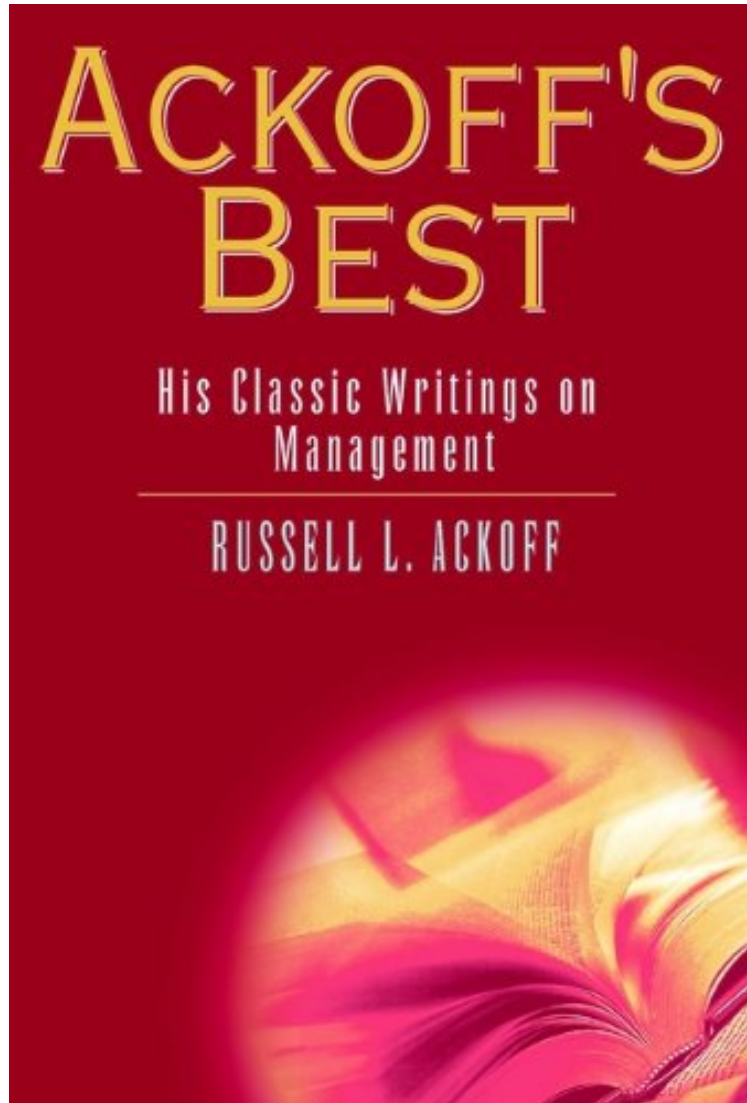


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## Ackoff's Best: His Classic Writings on Management

*Russell L. Ackoff*

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**Russell L. Ackoff : Ackoff's Best: His Classic Writings on Management** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ackoff's Best: His Classic Writings on Management:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A Very Readable Book that Merits/Rewards Re-reading By Dennis B. Mulcare Over the years, I was disinclined to read anything by Russell Ackoff largely because of my reservations regarding the notion of "management science". Then, I encountered and read his seminal if less known book On Purposeful Systems, and my high regard for it induced me to read Ackoff's Best. This latter book engagingly surveys a wide range of topics on a cogent, incisive, novel as well as readable basis. Despite the variety of topics offered, the chapters exhibit a surprising degree of continuity through the recurring invocation of his explicit terminology and

underlying ideas/concepts. Basically, I believe that Ackoff's original and provocative ideas are considerably enriched by his: training as a philosopher, pioneering role in systems thinking, and engaged/reflective consultation experience. Part I of Ackoff's Best introduces his systems thinking in a clear and substantive form. This includes background, rationale, and terminology for a systems mindset, and proceeds into penetrating if straightforward insights and concepts of general value in dealing with problematic real-world situations. Also, he describes a purposeful system as one that "selects means as well as ends", along with an important instance thereof called an ideal-seeking system. It can pursue an idealized goal by progressively approaching it more closely through a sequence of ever more refined sub-goals. In all, these ideas/concepts are not applicable merely in the management arena, but also to the engineering of physical systems. Part II introduces Ackoff's distinction between the glib notion of "solving problems" and the practical necessity of "managing messes". He characterizes messes as systems of interrelated problems that are not amenable to ease of definition much less isolation. Furthermore, the problems and their couplings are not stationary; rather, they are evolving with time, thereby complicating the mess. Accordingly, he recommends interactive planning, which begins with the characterization of the mess. The nature of such planning centers on "the design of a desirable future, and the selection or invention of ways of bringing it about as closely as possible". The latter option involves utilization of the aforementioned ideal-seeking system. Accordingly, this book lays the groundwork for the formalization of his idealized design methodology, which Ackoff more specifically describes in another of his books. A variety of system applications of Ackoff's concepts and methods appears in Part III. The one that I found most intriguing was the "Design of Management Systems". Here he defines management rather broadly as the "control of purposeful systems", a class much broader than just business enterprises. The example is a very rich one in that it addresses: organization management activities, management system support for those activities, and design methodology for developing the system. Detailed attention is directed to the learning and adaptation functions of the management support system in order to render the overall system purposeful, i.e., capable of making informed choices regarding both means and ends. Regarding incremental design of the overall management system, Ackoff advocates at first undertaking only a partial design of all subsystem coincidentally, typically with only limited overall system functionality. This course contrasts with developing one complete subsystem at a time, thereby largely deferring the confrontation of problematic interactions among subsystems. This example coherently integrates and illustrates a lot of key ideas developed over the rest of the book. In Part IV the book closes with a few essays on science, which describe important if subtle limitations on "hard" science. Objectivity, for example, is held necessarily to contain an element of qualitative judgment, thereby entailing that pure objectivity is unrealizable. Accordingly, Ackoff indicates that hard science is not as infallible or impervious to doubts or questioning as it is sometimes popularly regarded to be. Moreover, he cautions managers to guard against uncritical acceptance of statistical interpretations, like the classic case of correlation being assumed or insinuated to imply a cause-effect relationship. Perhaps most notably, operations research receives a rather severe critique here from one of its pioneers, largely due to its frequent detachment from practical, salient realities and to its tendency to seek refuge from "messes" in more tractable mathematical abstractions. Valuable concepts or heuristics appear somewhat unobtrusively throughout the book. One notable concept is that of producer-product (a necessary but insufficient relationship), as contrasted with that of cause-effect (a necessary and sufficient relationship). The producer-product relationship takes on special interest when sufficiency is dependent on a system's environment, an interaction that is vitally important to systems thinking. An example of a problem-related heuristic states "A wrong solution to the right problem is generally better than the right solution to the wrong problem". A basic systems heuristic holds that "Optimization of parts can suboptimize the system as a whole". The value and mutual support of such ideas may not always be intuitively clear at first, but their worth is well supported and elucidated in the book. Although Ackoff's Best is generally quite readable and readily understandable, it actually merits and rewards re-reading because it captures so much knowledge and wisdom from different perspectives. Moreover, Ackoff enhances the understandability of his ideas and summarizes/illustrates them through the modest but very effective use of figures and tables. The diagram of the overall management system in Part III is an excellent example. Ultimately, the book's aggregate content serves as an informed point of departure for exploring or applying either soft systems methodology or Ackoff's own idealized system design methodology. Even with my hard system methodology background/orientation, I consider these essays to be uniquely novel, insightful, well grounded, and of clear practical worth. In sum, a valuable book with surprisingly wide appeal!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Disappointing

By J. Sweeney I was surprised by the lack of evidence supporting claims in this book. I read it eagerly but was disappointed. Maybe I'll try again in a few years and see if it resonates. For now, I won't be recommending it.

27 of 28 people found the following review helpful. Journey into the mind of a great thinker.

By A Customer A fascinating collection of writings, compiled by the author, which explores, first and foremost, systems thinking and its effects upon business and management. But beyond this, these writings delve into an astounding array of subjects including: the nature of planning; problem solving; managing; mission statements; creativity and constraints; consumer design; education; crime; advertising; design of management systems; the nature of science and methodology; objectivity; rationality; the future of operations research; and the role of business in a democratic society. This book is nothing less than a journey into the many-faceted mind of a great thinker. For those with a high

level of curiosity about systems, organization, business, the human mind, and society, this collection is a gold mine, reflecting the richness of thought of this exceptional person. Highly recommended.

Russell Ackoff is a very special management thinker. As an architect, city planner, doctor of philosophy, behavioral scientist, trailblazer in the fields of organizational, operations, and systems theory, bestselling author, distinguished Wharton School professor, and head of his own management education and consulting firm, he qualifies, as do few others in this century, for the title of "Renaissance Man." Fortunately, he makes up for this grievous shortcoming by also being an outrageously funny observer of homo commercium. Now, Ackoff's Best offers you an opportunity to become acquainted with this irreverent genius who, over the past forty years, has done so much to shape our understanding of the modern business organization. Compiled by the author, Ackoff's Best encapsulates the author's most controversial, influential, and wittiest work to appear since the 1970s. Ackoff's groundbreaking exploration of systems theory and its effect on business provides the backbone of this collection. Also included are his most lasting and thought-provoking writings on an array of topics in business, society, and human behavior that well reflect the sweeping scope of Ackoff's intellect and expertise. From managing teams, maximizing the effectiveness of information systems, and problem solving, to creativity, crime, and the role of the corporation in a democratic society, these writings are a cornucopia of insights, observations, and powerful lessons that will help you maximize your personal development and the effectiveness of your organization. An excellent introduction for newcomers to Russell Ackoff, and a welcome compendium of Ackoff's pithiest writings for those already familiar with his ideas from such classic works as *Creating the Corporate Future* and *The Art of Problem Solving*, Ackoff's Best is required reading for every intelligent businessperson. "The range, depth, and perspectives of these essays on management illustrate, once again, Russ Ackoff's unique genius."-Warren Bennis, University Professor, University of Southern California, and Co-author, *Co-Leaders* "Russ Ackoff uses words that cut through the familiar and open doors in one's brain."-Arie P. de Geus, Author, *The Living Company* "Ackoff's Best captures the lucid and compelling explorations of one of the most profound and influential thinkers of our time."-Ray Stata, Chairman of the Board, Analog Devices "This collection reminds me that I have learned my most valuable lessons from Russ Ackoff."-Vince Barabba, General Manager, Corporate Strategy and Knowledge Development, General Motors Corporation

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From the Inside Flap Ackoff's Best Russell Ackoff is a very special management thinker. As an architect, city planner, doctor of philosophy, behavioral scientist, trailblazer in the fields of organizational, operations, and systems theory, bestselling author, distinguished Wharton School professor, and head of his own management education and consulting firm, he qualifies, as do few others in this century, for the title of "Renaissance Man." Fortunately, he makes up for this grievous shortcoming by also being an outrageously funny observer of homo commercium. Now, Ackoff's Best offers you an opportunity to become acquainted with this irreverent genius who, over the past forty years, has done so much to shape our understanding of the modern business organization. Compiled by the author, Ackoff's Best encapsulates the author's most controversial, influential, and wittiest work to appear since the 1970s. Ackoff's groundbreaking exploration of systems theory and its effect on business provides the backbone of this collection. Also included are his most lasting and thought-provoking writings on an array of topics in business, society, and human behavior that well reflect the sweeping scope of Ackoff's intellect and expertise. From managing teams, maximizing the effectiveness of information systems, and problem solving, to creativity, crime, and the role of the corporation in a democratic society, these writings are a cornucopia of insights, observations, and powerful lessons that will help you maximize your personal development and the effectiveness of your organization. An excellent introduction for newcomers to Russell Ackoff, and a welcome compendium of Ackoff's pithiest writings for those already familiar with his ideas from such classic works as *Creating the Corporate Future* and *The Art of Problem Solving*, Ackoff's Best is required reading for every intelligent businessperson.

From the Back Cover Russell Ackoff is a very special management thinker. As an architect, city planner, doctor of philosophy, behavioral scientist, trailblazer in the fields of organizational, operations, and systems theory, bestselling author, distinguished Wharton School professor, and head of his own management education and consulting firm, he qualifies, as do few others in this century, for the title of "Renaissance Man." Fortunately, he makes up for this grievous shortcoming by also being an outrageously funny observer of homo commercium. Now, Ackoff's Best offers you an opportunity to become acquainted with this irreverent genius who, over the past forty years, has done so much to shape our understanding of the modern business organization. Compiled by the author, Ackoff's Best encapsulates the author's most controversial, influential, and wittiest work to appear since the 1970s. Ackoff's groundbreaking exploration of systems theory and its effect on business provides the backbone of this collection. Also included are his most lasting and thought-provoking writings on an array of topics in business, society, and human behavior that well reflect the sweeping scope of Ackoff's intellect and expertise. From managing teams, maximizing the effectiveness of information systems, and problem solving, to creativity, crime, and the role of the corporation in a democratic society, these writings are a cornucopia of insights, observations, and powerful lessons that will help you maximize your personal development

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