

*The Community of the Future*, edited by Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Beckhard and Richard F. Schubert

reviewed by [James W. Lewis](#) in the [October 7, 1998](#) issue

*Edited by Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Beckhard and Richard F. Schubert, The Community of the Future. (Jossey-Bass, 285 pp.)*

It is difficult to imagine a more pressing contemporary concern than the future of human community. Unfortunately, although *The Community of the Future* purports to confront the issue directly, it fails to deliver. Aiming at an audience of business leaders, the editors enlisted 24 authors, including several celebrated figures from the corporate and management consultant worlds (including James Barksdale of Netscape and Stephen Covey). Many authors make for short chapters. This "executive summary" format frequently precludes thoughtful analysis.

Fortunately, there are exceptions. For example, in "Economic Community and Social Investment" Lester Thurow points out that market capitalism focuses on short-term individual needs at the expense of the long-term investments in education, research and personnel that a more comprehensive community can make. And in her chapter, "Five Building Blocks for Successful Communities," Suzanne Morse suggests what such an inclusive community might look like.

Implicit in several chapters is an argument about the relationship of local place to community. Does community require physical proximity, or is "virtual community" all we now need? James Barksdale enthusiastically and Howard Rheingold more cautiously endorse the notion of a digital community. By contrast, Jaime Zobel de Ayala insists that, in developing countries at least, physical proximity remains an important aspect of community. But since the writers of these essays don't refer to each other, the book is a series of monologues rather than a conversation.

If this book has a thesis, it is that building future communities will require cooperative partnerships between private, public and social sectors (business, government and community and religious organizations respectively). As we are often reminded, numerous "big government" social programs in both the U.S. and the former communist bloc failed spectacularly. Consequently, some of these writers

claim that we should turn to business executives, whose ability to increase a company's stock value in a time of rapid social change presumably gives them a privileged perspective on other issues. Other, wiser heads acknowledge past failures but advocate greater cooperation among government, business and social sectors.

But even the cooperation they advocate is too often a top-down affair dominated by business elites. Frances Hesselbein says, "We need only a handful of leaders, with a vision of what their community could be, to drive the effort." *Noblesse oblige*. This fundamentally elitist view becomes increasingly annoying. Although leaders are essential, community, in the end, is not just about leaders; it is about all of us. Leaders cannot create community where none exists.

More basically, the book fails to give a coherent definition of community. For some authors, community is the corporate community; for others it is the Internet's virtual community; for still others it is the global community. Nor does the book offer any guidance on how our history might inform our future.

What about the role of the church in all this? Do Christian leaders and other believers have anything distinctive to contribute to contemporary discussions about community? The issue is too important to leave to futurists and business executives. The churches are stewards of a long, rich tradition of thinking about human community. Religious institutions remain one of the few places where people of all races and classes are (at least theoretically and sometimes actually) welcome, where people of all ages and family conditions gather regularly to do important, life-transforming work together, where local loyalties and worldwide commitments coexist. It may be our responsibility, not that of business leaders and other elites, to encourage and embody the community of the future.