

BOOK REVIEW
Orbiting the Giant Hairball
A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace
By Gordon MacKenzie
Viking Penguin, 1998

This month's book review is a particular pleasure for me to write. Not only is *Orbiting the Giant Hairball* an excellent read, I found out to my surprise that I actually knew the author in another life. While browsing the "Business Motivation" section at my local Barnes and Noble a couple of years ago, I saw the name "Gordon MacKenzie" and thought to myself, could it be the same person I knew so many years ago when I worked for Hallmark Cards? A quick examination of the first pages of the book confirmed this and also had me hooked—I had to buy the book!

When I knew Gordon in the early 1980's, he seemed to know everyone at Hallmark. He was a very unique sort of company cheerleader. We all knew that Gordon worked in the Contemporary Cards Division, but no one knew for sure what his job was. He was extremely likable and, upon meeting you, treated you as if he had known you for a long time. He was also a true artist, and had a refreshing perspective on just about everything. By reading the book, I learned that Gordon had, in subsequent years, managed to create his own job at Hallmark conducting creativity seminars and ultimately the self-styled position of Creative Paradox. As Creative Paradox, Gordon encouraged those whose creative ideas had been caught up in the corporate "hairball" helping them bring their ideas to fruition.

I tried to contact Gordon after I discovered his book through an exhaustive internet search. With much sadness, I learned that he passed away a few years after he had retired from Hallmark and had embarked on a career as a corporate speaker. It's a shame that his particular brand of "in-person" genius is now lost, but we have these words with which to remember him.

The book is entertaining and refreshing, written in a spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness style with child-like drawings and pictures throughout, even hand-written in places. The first time I read it, I found myself laughing out loud (and you will too) at Gordon's view of corporate America. But there is something deeper in this book. On the second read, I found myself gaining a new understanding of Gordon's message. I will do my best to recap it here, because I think it is important.

Gordon defines "hairball" as the bureaucracy that companies create through endless rules, policies, procedures, management layers and practices. Each "rule" is like a little hair that gets connected or knotted to other hairs, and the result is a giant hairball. Gordon spends a lot of the book cautioning against becoming caught up in the hairball. He says he spent many years trying to

extricate himself and others from the hairball, but finally decided that wasn't possible, so he recommends "orbiting" the hairball. Orbiting is just what it implies—using the hairball as a source for energy, but moving in an oval around the hairball at a fast enough rate so as to not be sucked into its vacuum. The hairball is actually good and necessary and serves a purpose by keeping creativity grounded, but it must not be regarded as the company itself.

Gordon says hairball policies are based on *past* successes and have no relevance to future success. Creativity is all about future success. Hairball policies are linear in nature, creativity is non-linear. A linear system is simply the sum total of its parts, while a non-linear system becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Gordon decries the lack of creativity within organizations, and the damping effect of hairball procedures on the creativity of employees. To prove how the educational system (a hairball organization) stifles creativity early on, Gordon relates an experience he had while delivering creativity workshops to children. At his children's workshops, he always asked, "How many artists do we have here today?" In the first grade classes, every child raised and waved their hands in the air. In the second grade classes, about 50% of the children raised their hands. In the third grade, about 10 out of 30 timidly raised their hands. In the sixth grade classes, only 1 or 2 children raised their hands. Gordon claims that our business organizations (hairballs) are inadvertently designed to further stifle individual creativity.

He says employees who are not in touch with and exploring their own personal creativity are, in fact, of little use to the organization itself. Organizations that do not encourage creativity risk remaining in the past and will struggle to create the products and organic systems that will propel growth.

I have heard this book described by other reviewers as the "cult classic" of creativity. If you decide to read this book, I think you'll find it highly entertaining and useful in your business life.

Order the book here: [Orbiting the Giant Hairball \(insert link\)](#)