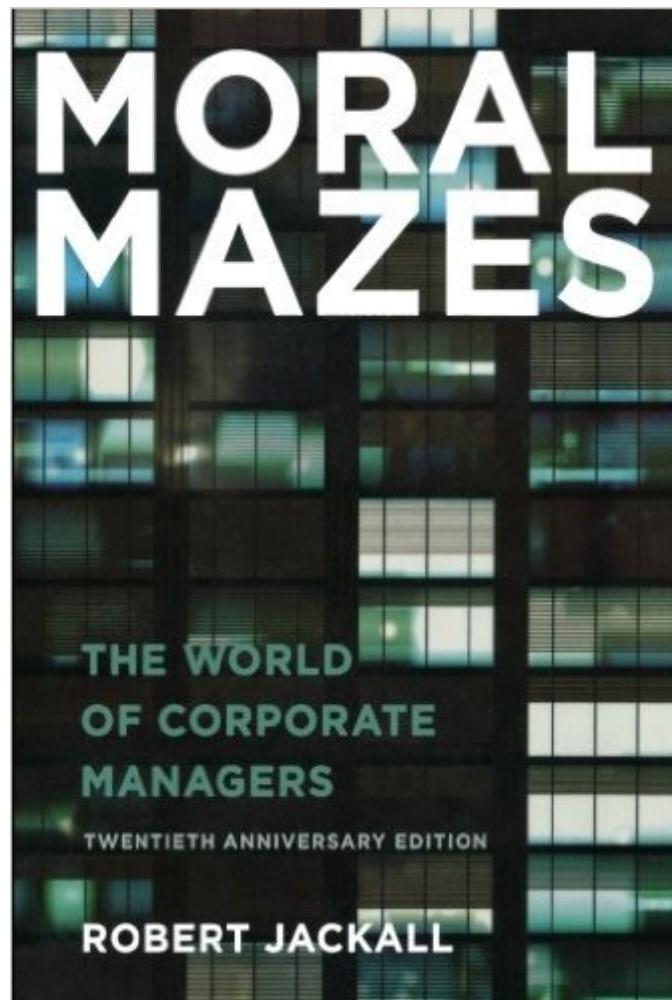


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Moral Mazes: The World Of Corporate Managers



Synopsis

This classic study of ethics in business presents an eye-opening account of how corporate managers think the world works, and how big organizations shape moral consciousness. Robert Jackall takes the reader inside a topsy-turvy world where hard work does not necessarily lead to success, but sharp talk, self-promotion, powerful patrons, and sheer luck might. What sort of everyday rules-in-use do people play by when there are no fixed standards to explain why some succeed and others fail? In the words of one corporate manager, those rules boil down to this maxim: "What is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you. That's what morality is in the corporation." This brilliant, disturbing, funny look at the ethos of the corporate world presents compelling real life stories of the men and women charged with running the businesses of America. This anniversary edition includes an afterword by the author linking the themes of Moral Mazes to the financial tsunami that engulfed the world economy in 2008.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Moral Mazes" is an extensive, award-winning and highly accurate sociological portrait of life in the modern corporation, an academic precursor, so to speak, of the "Dilbert" cartoon strip. Unlike many other writers on this topic, Jackall doesn't resort to Marxist rants, but rather, compares modern corporate culture to the "Protestant" work ethic most Americans are raised into. Jackall's inquiry, based on in-depth interviews with managers themselves, is broad in scope, and it is hard to generalize. Within about 200 pages, he covers the social circles of the corporation, cronyism, bad

decisionmaking and public relations, to name a few. He discovers that corporations, at the upper levels at least, resemble a king's court more than a meritocratic organization. The essential work of a manager is not "management" or "leadership," but constantly making the right friends and adopting the correct posture. Anyone who has worked in such a setting, or knows people in such a field, will be able to relate instantly, although it can be argued that Jackall did not need to spend years of ethnographic research to reach this conclusion. This book is not for everyone, as Jackall must conclude that "ethics" as practiced by managers is nothing more than "survival" and ambition for one's own "advantage." While such a diagnosis may seem harsh, it is difficult to rationally explain recent events in the marketplace, such as the Enron scandal, without concluding that corporate executives have a moral compass that differs from that of the everyday person. Contrary to what a layman may think, Jackall makes no moral judgments of his own, although readers most certainly will. The title itself can be misinterpreted by people not familiar with sociology.

Robert Jackall is a sociologist by profession, currently teaching at Williams College. His book was originally published in the late '80s, based on his research of corporate life which was conducted earlier in the decade. It has recently been reissued, most fittingly so, as a twentieth anniversary edition, with an additional 20 page chapter entitled "Moral Mazes and the Great Recession." In this chapter Jackall demonstrates how many of the characteristics of corporate life, in particular, the expedient and contextual value systems, that he identified in the early '80s were operative in both causing the financial meltdown of 2008, as well as in the reaction to it. He credits a noble predecessor, C. Wright Mills, for originating the phrase "organized irresponsibility" in describing corporate life, which certainly was most operative in the explanations for the financial disaster: no one was responsible, it was a "Tsunami," and we had no idea it was coming. In the introduction to his original book, Jackall states that his objective is to answer the following question: "What rules do people fashion to interact with one another when they feel that, instead of ability, talent, and dedicated service to an organization, politics, adroit talk, luck, connections, and self-promotion are the real sorters of people into sheep and goats?" For a work by a sociologist, this is a bit of an outlier: no tables or graphs to bolster a scientific, quantitative approach. And I think it is all the better for it. He lays out his methodology at the beginning, and admits that the vast majority of corporations that he approached refused to let him conduct his research.

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