

Institutional Intelligence: How to Build an Effective Organization
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Gordon T. Smith unpacks the core of institutional intelligence – the wisdom of working effectively within an organization. At the same time, he shows how team leaders, directors, executives, board members, key stakeholders, and employees can avoid what is often their greatest source of stress on the job – working with the institutional character of their organizations. Focusing on the non-profit sector, Smith unlocks the essential elements of how institutions function in a productive, healthy manner.

Key Elements for Dynamic Institutions

You have written books on calling, theology, vocation, and more. Where does this book fall among the books you've published?

Gordon T. Smith: In one sense, this is a new venture for me – I am branching out. However, there is also continuity: (1) I am a theologian and this book considers what it means to think theologically about institutions and (2) I have published several works on vocation with the focus on the individual. In this case I am asking “What does it mean for an institution to fulfill its vocation?”

Why a book on institutions? Why are they important?

Smith: We are all part of institutions and dependent on them. Thus, we are at our best when we understand how they work and how we can each contribute to the flourishing of the institutions that matter to us.

What is the main idea of *Institutional Intelligence*?

Smith: Institutions matter and an anti-institutional mindset is self-defeating. We need to cultivate an understanding of how institutions work. This book identifies the key elements or features of dynamic institutions.

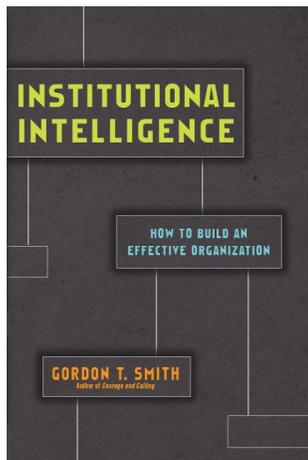
What is unique about your contribution to the topic of institutions?

Smith: What is distinctive about this approach is that it provides a resource for actually doing a review of the institutions of which we are a part to identify what is working, what is not working, and why.

What are some key takeaways for readers?

Smith:

- I make the case for why institutions matter, suggesting that we need to learn what it means to think theologically about institutions.
- *Institutional Intelligence* identifies the key elements of a dynamic institution – something not available in this form in any comparable resource.
- Many readers will value the sections on (1) how to identify institutional mission, (2) how to establish a governance structure that can deliver on that mission, and (3) how to recruit and develop the kind of people who can make the mission of the institution happen.



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"I'm thrilled that Dr. Smith has written this book in which he was able to reflect creatively on what constitutes the right building blocks for a healthy institution. I highly recommend this book to all church, seminary, and nonprofit leaders."

– **Riad Kassis**, international director, International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, director, Langham Scholars Ministry, Langham Partnership

The Power of Institutional Intelligence

An institution is a social structure that leverages wisdom, talent, and resources toward a common cause or purpose. More specifically, it is a means, an architecture – specifically a social architecture – by which we can pursue a shared and greater good together. Just as a soul cannot exist except as embodied, there is no community, no vision, no mission without institutions. The idea, the vision, will not happen, will not make a difference, until and unless it is housed in an institution.

The point at issue, then, is not whether we have institutions or not. Rather, the question is whether we will invest in them and know how to make them effective. They are always imperfect because people are imperfect. And yet they outlive us, and to the degree that we get them right, good things – indeed, very good things – happen.

If you want to address matters of poverty, invest time and energy in an institution that gets at the underlying causes and responds deeply and effectively to the problem. If you have a dream to educate a generation, dream on, I say, if you are not willing to invest in an academic institution that will actually make the dream happen. If as a church you want to have a long-term impact on the lives of individuals, families, a community, and the lives of those in that community, then you must consider the institutional character of congregational life.

In none of these cases do we merely need someone with a good idea. We need people who have invested in and know how to sustain effective, vital institutions made up of people, at all levels of the institution, who know how to think institutionally. They get it; they know what it takes for a good idea to actually make a difference. They have institutional intelligence.

We need to persuade a younger generation of Christian leaders that investing in institutions makes sense. They can be creative, strategic, and even revolutionary and not assume that in so doing, they have to be anti-institutional. Indeed, if they are going to have a lasting impact on the church and on society, they need to think institutionally and invest time and energy in institutions, especially institutions they believe in. But for that, two things are needed: to affirm that institutions matter and, further, to identify what it means to think and act with institutional intelligence.

We might be impressed by the pioneer missionary, not part of a mission agency, perhaps, independently striving to change the world. Or we might be taken with the individual blogger who is valiantly profiling some recurring wrong, a prophet alone in the wilderness. Or we might be moved by the clever entrepreneurs or inventors who emerge from their back rooms with revolutionary ideas. And yet if the impact of the blogger is going to take and

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truly alter our society – the church, the community, the politics that shape our shared lives – eventually those ideas need to find expression within the core values of an institution if they are going to make a difference and truly come up against the very thing the blogger is protesting.

In academic institutions, faculty are invited into something larger than themselves. They flourish, with others, when they foster an institutional intelligence to work effectively within those institutions.

Pastors need to be encouraged to view the work of administration not as a necessary evil, a distraction, but as rather an integral part of what it means to provide congregational leadership. Indeed, if their vision for a vital community of faith is going to happen, they will need to attend to the institutional dimensions of church life – the administrative, financial, personnel issues of what it means to be the church.

Those who work within a nonprofit agency need to appreciate that the organization is not merely a platform for their own vocational aspirations. Rather, the organization of which they are a part reflects a potential, a possibility for making a difference, that merits focused attention not merely on the individual calling but on the shared calling reflected in the organizational mission.

If you are violin player or a flute player, you can be a soloist for sure. But there are few things so powerful as an orchestra, a symphony orchestra, and you cannot be part of an orchestra unless you learn to work with, to play with, others as part of an authoritative community – that is, a community that has a structure, a form, a system that is governed towards a common objective.

So much great talent and opportunity is missed simply because we do not give adequate attention to the institutions that could leverage our shared potential toward a greater good. Taking this personally I say to you, the reader: If you want to make a difference – with all the talent, vision, and wisdom that God has given you – then learn to work with and in institutions. Your impact will be exponentially greater if your calling or vocation can be leveraged against the calling and potential of others toward a common goal, a shared vision.

It will mean fostering institutional intelligence: learning to work with others, within institutions. It means understanding how institutions work, how they can be most effective, and how you can contribute to a greater whole by learning to work within institutional systems. It means growing in your capacity to appreciate how institutions are founded, how they work, how they grow and adapt, and how they are governed.

– Adapted from chapter one, *“The Meaning of Institutions”*

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