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Book Review

R. M. Penna and W. J. Phillips. (2004).
Outcome Frameworks: An Overview for Practitioners.
Rensselaerville: The Rensselaerville Institute.

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According to the full title of Robert M. Penna and William J. Phillips' recent work, *Outcome Frameworks*, it is "an overview for practitioners." By explaining the context in which outcome thinking emerged and presenting some of the sector's most popular frameworks, the book does indeed provide a solid overview on the topic. However, the book, especially the second half, seems better suited for consultants than practitioners.

Penna and Phillips open by framing the history of outcome thinking. Referencing everything from the *Reinvention of Government* in the early 1990s to an increased interest in running public programs like businesses, the authors speculate about what fed the movement's popularity—or as they put it, *The New World Order.* They go on to argue that due to the myriad of contributing factors, outcome thinking has "gone well beyond the fad status to become an undeniable trend," and therefore "is here to stay."

The second chapter seeks to define outcome thinking. Citing an abundance of possible interpretations, the authors opt for a simplified definition. Using one of Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, they argue that to operate within an outcome framework is to "begin with the end in mind." To further illustrate this point, they compare being *outcome-focused* to being *process-focused*. In a table that asks both process and outcome-focused questions, they illustrate the difference between these two approaches. While the more traditional process-focused approach emphasizes the actions taken by the organization, the outcome-focused approach concentrates on the ultimate impact of those actions.

The next two chapters serve to further define and put into context the outcome movement. Most valuable is the section on the "language of outcomes," which reviews the terms and concepts prevalent in most frameworks . Although the explanations supplied do not sufficiently prepare practitioners for independent work with outcomes, they do offer insights that may prove useful for future learning.

To anyone who has worked in the public sector in the past decade, it is unlikely that these first few chapters will prove groundbreaking. Due to pressing demands from funders, board members, and countless other sources, most practitioners are

well aware of the significance of the outcome movement. True, they may benefit from learning about its historical context or its various contributors. More than likely, what most practitioners would seek to gain from this book is an idea of which framework best suits their organization.

This demand is what makes a book such as this—which promises to be an overview for practitioners—so promising. And this demand is what the remainder of the book seemed positioned to address. Unfortunately, it falls short in doing so.

By design, the final half of the book serves as a directory. In total, the authors introduce nine different frameworks. The Project Logic Model, Balanced Score Card, and Outcome Funding Framework are presented as the sector's most popular approaches, and they receive most of the authors' attention. Descriptions of the remaining six alternatives comprise just a few paragraphs each.

No one approach is addressed in any great detail, and no formal recommendations are made regarding which approaches are most appropriate for which types of programs. Although, it is worth noting that the Outcome Funding Framework, originated by the book's publisher, receives the most attention and praise. As such, readers will not walk away with clearly defined next-steps, let alone a definitive idea of which approach is appropriate for them. At best, they will gain an increased familiarity of potential frameworks to guide their future pursuits. Therein lies the problem.

Most practitioners are very busy addressing the daily realities of the sector. They do not have time to do a lot of reading on the historical significance of a movement, if they are not also acquiring some idea of how to apply this knowledge to benefit their organization. Unfortunately, the book does not seem to recognize this reality. Instead it requires that practitioners do more reading, more investigating, more learning about potential frameworks, before any action can be taken.

In an attempt to provide a comprehensive overview, the authors water-down the book's potential benefit to practitioners. If instead they had focused on just those models they deemed most useful, the second half of the book would have been significantly more valuable. While maintaining the book's manageable length, the authors could have gone into more detail on the specific steps needed to implement each chosen model, and ultimately left readers with the insight necessary to proceed with implementation.

As it exists now, the book seems better suited for consultants (or anyone else seeking basic knowledge on the topic). After all, consultants are often hired by practitioners to investigate topics such as this one and make recommendations accordingly. For them, this book will likely serve as a good stepping-stone.

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