

# MARY PARKER FOLLETT

1868 - 1933

A Boston-born social worker, community organizer and prominent theorist of both political science and management and organizational behavior. Follett was both a pragmatist and a realist - credited with creating the concept of after school programs. Her lifelong mission was to distill a method by which the full integrity of the individual could be realized in a way that aligned with collective and social progress. She wrote eloquently of what was required for participatory democracy to work. Although her peers did not fully appreciate her work during her life time, she is credited as the mother of participative management for her thoughts on shared power, leadership, lateral authority, conflict management and integration.

#### Most famous for:

The Speaker of the House of Representatives (1896)

The New State (1918)

Creative Experience (1924)

Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett (1942)



Follett modified Max Weber's conception of authority to create the concept of lateral authority – horizontal authority based on expertise rather than on role. These arguments acknowledged the fundamental expertise of workers vis a vis managers and are credited with prompting the first matrix organization at DuPont.

She articulated the difference between “power over” and “power with” – encouraging attention to those who follow as well as those who lead. Her ideas of reciprocal action or mutual influence saw the possibility for followers to affect leaders as much as leaders affect followers. She viewed management not as a toolkit but as a process and articulated a coherent post-bureaucratic conception of management, urging leaders to replace bureaucracy with empowered group networks armed with a common purpose. She viewed differences as the material for integrating a richer set of interests – “all polishing comes from friction”.

“We must face life as it is and understand that diversity is its most essential feature.” Follett urged never to ask who is right in a conflict but to seek to understand, assume both sides are right and integrate legitimate interests to create new solutions. According to Warren Bennis, “Just about everything written today about leadership and organizations comes from Mary Parker Follett’s writings and lectures.”

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