The canon of management literature and the list of management thinkers are dominated by men. The exceptions to this are substantial thinkers. None more so than the American political scientist Mary Parker Follett. Though generally ignored, Follett was decades ahead of her time. She was discussing issues such as teamworking and responsibility (now reborn as empowerment) in the first decades of the 20th century. Follett was a female, liberal humanist in an era dominated by reactionary males intent on mechanising the world of business. The breadth and humanity of her work was a refreshing counter to the dehumanised visions of Frederick Taylor and others, “We should remember that we can never wholly separate the human from the mechanical sides,” warned Follett in Dynamic Administration. “The study of human relations in business and the study of the technology of operating are bound up together.”

Born in Quincy, Massachusetts, Follett attended Thayer Academy and the Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women in Cambridge, Massachusetts (now part of Harvard University). She also studied at Newnham College, Cambridge, in the UK and in Paris. Her first published work was The Speaker of the House of Representatives (1896), which she wrote while still a student.

Follett’s career was largely spent in social work though her books appeared regularly – The New State (1918), an influential description of Follett’s brand of dynamic democracy, and Creative Experience (1924), Follett’s first business-oriented book. In her later years she was in great demand as a lecturer. After the death of a long-time partner, Isobel Briggs, in 1926 she moved to London.

The simple thrust of Follett’s thinking was that people were central to any business activity – or, indeed, to any other activity. “I think we should un-departmentalise our thinking in regard to every problem that comes to us,” said Follett. “I do not think that we have psychological and ethical and economic problems. We have human problems, with psychological, ethical and economical aspects, and as many others as you like.”

In particular, Follett explored conflict. She argued that as conflict is a fact of life “we should, I think, use it to work for us”. Follett pointed out three ways of dealing with confrontation: domination; compromise; or integration. The latter, she concluded, is the only positive way forward. This can be achieved by first “uncovering” the real conflict and then taking “the demands of both sides and breaking them up into their constituent parts”.

“Our outlook is narrowed, our activity is restricted, our chances of business success largely diminished when our thinking is constrained within the limits of what has been
called an either-or situation. We should never allow ourselves to be bullied by an ‘either-or’. There is often the possibility of something better than either of two given alternatives,” Follett wrote.

Follett advocated giving greater responsibility to people – at a time when the mechanical might of mass production was at its height. “Responsibility is the great developer of men,” she wrote. How many modern CEOs would mouth the same sentiments but still be unable to put them into practice?

There was also a modern ring to Follett’s advice on leadership: “the most successful leader of all is one who sees another picture not yet actualised”. Follett saw the leader’s tasks as co-ordination, defining the purpose of the business and anticipation – “we look to the leader to open up new paths, new opportunities”.

Follett suggested that a leader was someone who saw the whole rather than the particular, organised the experiences of the group, offered a vision of the future and trained followers to become leaders.

Indeed, Follett was an early advocate of management training and that leadership could be taught. “The theory has been of personal domination, but study the political leaders, the party bosses, and notice how often they have gained their positions by their ability to bring into harmonious relation men of antagonistic temperaments, their ability to reconcile conflicting interests, their ability to make a working unit out of many diverse elements.”

Follett’s work was largely neglected. Peter Drucker, now an admirer, recalls that when he was seeking out management literature in the 1940s, no-one even mentioned Follett’s name. Once again, however, a western thinker was honoured in Japan, which even boasts a Follett Society. Her work has now been brought to a wider audience through the British academic Pauline Graham – in 1994, Graham edited *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management*, a compendium of Follett’s writings with commentaries from a host of contemporary figures including Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Drucker and Henry Mintzberg.

Resources