

KEY TO FREEMASONRY'S GROWTH

By: Allen E. Roberts

Reviewed by Dan M. Kemble, Past Master,
William O. Ware Lodge of Research

Allen E. Roberts (1917 – 1997) was a prolific writer who wrote on a wide variety of topics related to Freemasonry. Although perhaps best known for his works in the areas of biography and history, he also wrote extensively and regularly about issues related to leadership in Freemasonry. One of his earliest books, fourth of the roughly twenty-five that he published, was *Key to Freemasonry's Growth*. This groundbreaking work may have been the first instance in which business management principles were applied to Freemasonry.

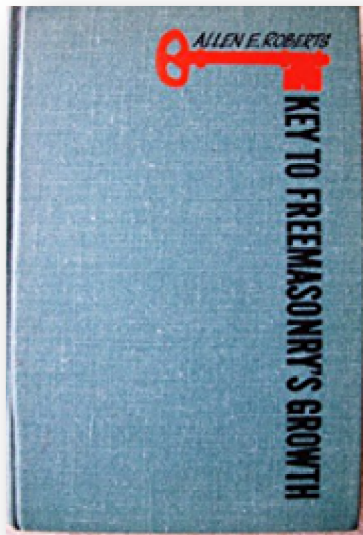


Don't be fooled by the title to this book. *Key to Freemasonry's Growth* is not about adding numbers to the Fraternity's membership rolls, at least not directly. The growth to which Roberts refers is spiritual and intellectual growth, which, if actually occurring within the body of Freemasonry, may, in fact, lead to a numerical increase as well.

The Foreword to *Key to Freemasonry's Growth* was written by Dwight L. Smith, Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Indiana. M. W. Bro. Smith established the tone for this work by writing:

“Usages that our early Masonic fathers in America would not have tolerated for one moment stifle good leadership and discourage membership participation.”

From that point, Roberts describes Smith's criticism in detail, and offers a definite path to good leadership practices and increased member involvement.



Ultimately, *Key to Freemasonry's Growth* is a book about leadership, and the importance of effective leadership in the local Lodge and at the Grand Lodge level. Roberts may be the first Masonic writer to incorporate ideas from well-known business leaders, as well as suggestions from articles found in the *Harvard Business Journal*, into a plan to rejuvenate leadership in Freemasonry. Roberts makes a convincing case that sound business principles, as applied in Masonic settings, can lead to desirable results.

In the book's Prologue, Roberts sets the stage by describing the current condition of many American Lodges (recall that he wrote this book in 1969). He describes Lodges where the typical meeting consists of reading minutes and treasurer's reports, and paying bills. In such Lodges, there is no education provided for members other than recitations of ritual. Members are generally unable to answer questions that go beyond a mechanical understanding of Freemasonry, and which address the substance of its nature.

In Chapter 1, “Freemasonry in Perspective,” Roberts attempts to define Freemasonry. He cites a number of definitions, from those adopted by certain Grand Lodges and the

Conference of Grand Masters in North America to passages from the writings of Henry W. Coil and Ray V. Denslow. Roberts then goes beyond Grand Lodge Masonry to look at the meaning of Freemasonry as found in the 14th century's Regius Poem. He then moves into a review of Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 and 1738, and discussed the "Old Charges" and the regulations contained therein.

Throughout *Key to Freemasonry's Growth*, Roberts uses charts, or "Guides," as he refers to them, to amplify his key points. The first such "Guide" is found following his discussion of Anderson's Constitutions, and Roberts uses it to compare and contrast the emphasis on different elements of importance in Freemasonry in the pre-Grand Lodge era and in the contemporary Grand Lodge era.

Chapter 2, "Recognizing and 'Growing' the Leader," begins his analysis of the failings of leadership in Freemasonry, and addresses his plan for improvement. Relying on articles in the *Harvard Business Journal*, Roberts identifies two distinct types of leadership – constructive and obstructive. As may be imagined, constructive leadership is a characteristic of a healthy and successful organization, while obstructive leadership is unproductive. The theme of constructive leadership versus obstructive leadership continues throughout the book.

Chapter 3, "The Purpose for Existence," explores the reasons that men assemble as Freemasons. While it may be generally agreed that our purpose is "to make good men better," there is longstanding debate as to how to accomplish that. In this chapter, Roberts leans heavily on examples from the business world, and concludes that Freemasonry should formulate and adopt a plan defining general steps leading to self-improvement.

Chapter 4, "Planning Turns the Key," may represent the heart of Roberts's work. Clearly, he is passionate about the need for planning, and he makes a clear case for the necessity of both short-term and long-term planning. He writes that planning in a Masonic setting must provide for balance, flexibility and accountability.

Chapter 5, "Organizing the Organization," discusses the need for delegation of both responsibility and authority within the group. He emphasizes the need for members at all levels to ask why," and questions the "that's the way we've always done it" mentality. Roberts writes at length about the benefits of seeing that all members have a role, thereby becoming invested in the overall success of the Lodge. He quotes the work of M. Valliant Higginson, *Management Policies I*, with respect to the achievement of goals through the technique of management through the establishment of policies, as opposed to management through the issuance of rules and regulations. He asserts that policies are less rigid and more likely to lead to the desired outcome.

Chapter 6, "Good Communication Removes Barriers," includes a discussion of good listening skills. Roberts writes that obstacles to effective communication include a perception that leadership is removed from the reality of what is happening within the group, poor morale existing within the group, and a lack of motivation among group members.

Roberts quotes from David K. Berlo's *The Process of Communication* by including a specific exercise designed to create an understanding of the dynamics of communication.

Chapter 7, "Controlling the Action," is a contrast of approaches to group leadership. Roberts writes about the need to "control" as opposed to the desire to "direct" the behavior of the group. Roberts indicates that "direction" is ultimately a more positive, and likely more productive, approach. In this chapter, Roberts cites the need for supportive leadership, a "team" spirit and trust at all levels. He relies on the article, "Measuring Organization Performance," written by Rensis Likert for the April 1958 edition of *Harvard Business Review*.

In this discussion, Roberts examines the need for self-control, in both leadership and among the membership, and returns to his theme of constructive versus obstructive leadership.

In this Epilogue, Roberts writes,

“Where there has been good management, Freemasons have worked gladly and wholeheartedly for the Fraternity.”

Compare that statement with the phrase,

“...among whom there should be no contention, except that most noble contention of who can best work, and who can best agree,”

Clearly, it appears that Roberts believes that good management skills, as applied to Freemasonry, would cause Lodges, whether subordinate or Grand, to achieve the harmonious and successful state contemplated in our ritual.

Roberts concludes with an exhortation to “remove the blindfold,” and take a new look at how institutional Freemasonry would benefit from the practices of sound business management. Roberts asserts that just as the business world develops successful leaders, Freemasonry can employ such a model to successfully do the same.

Key to Freemasonry's Growth includes two Appendices, the first of which is an article written by Roberts titled, “We Can Do It.” This article appeared in *The Short Talk Bulletin*, Volume XLVI, October 1968. The second is “The Ten Commandments of Good Communication,” published in 1955 by the American Management Association, Inc.

In ***Key to Freemasonry's Growth***, Allen E. Roberts likely produced the first book length treatment of business and leadership practices applied to Freemasonry. That the issues that he so clearly identified in 1969 still plague the Fraternity today is a stinging indictment of Freemasonry's unwillingness to engage in any meaningful self-examination of its practices. Although some of Roberts's examples seem a bit dated now, the several arguments that he makes retain their original force.

Key to Freemasonry's Growth is an honest assessment of the leadership styles found within Freemasonry (and other organizations), and offers a path to improvement of the group egregore and a more likely path to the achievement of its goals. Applied to Freemasonry, it can serve to reinvigorate a lackluster and decidedly ordinary Masonic experience. This book is just as relevant today, as when it was first published over fifty years ago. Any engaged member of a Masonic Lodge, especially anyone who aspires to positions of leadership, would be well advised to read this book.

Key to Freemasonry's Growth is cleverly illustrated by Chick Larsen, cartoonist for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Larsen's drawings evoke an immediate response from anyone who has been actively involved in Masonic or leadership activities.

Key to Freemasonry's Growth, first published in 1969, remains available from most online booksellers.