

CAVEAT READER

BY

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I read a lot, and regularly go to bookstores looking for new books. Every time, I'm taken aback by the number of biographies and "My Way" stories in the business section. There are so many; they're so earnest; there are so many people browsing and, apparently, buying them. It seems that anything is a reason to buy/read these books: an uptick, an impending recession, business excitement or ennui, travel or staying at home. Everybody is looking for an edge, which is fine so long as you don't go *over* the edge. But it's the cult of business celebrity.

Despite the allure of the "How I Did It" story, and its promise of genuine insight and wisdom, don't believe everything you read. How "it" was done as told in the book often has the ugliness-eliminating soft focus that comes from taking liberties with the facts. Rewriting history is, after all, the prerogative of the winners. On the other hand, screeds written to reduce the reputation of a corporate titan are equally hazardous. They tend to be overly critical, attributing more blame and giving less credit than due. Rarely does either present an evenhanded appraisal of events. The truth is out there, but probably not in the books chronicling the history of a business or its leader.

In fact, there's good cause to be leery about books and their authors, whatever their authority, that draw conclusions on the basis of examples only. Eternal truths rarely appear in brief flashes of insight. You may vaguely remember this being

the case following the extremely successful, vanguard sample of this genre, *In Search of Excellence*. In the years following its publication, and during Tom Peters's ascendancy as the guru di tutti gurus, a number of the *excellent* companies in the book had come to look not so excellent any more. The pattern has repeated itself with frightening consistency in the ensuing decades.

One should be careful about using the lessons of these examples because the conditions that gave rise to the original success are guaranteed to be not the same as those facing the reader. Chances are that the reader is also not the same person as the story's hero either. What's more, timing and fortune are big factors in the equation. Both arise out of circumstance and ability that is particular to each individual situation. So even by following the example religiously, which people do, the results will almost assuredly not be the same.

Almost always, case histories inherently presume that the chain of decisions from start to finish was linear and binary. That is, there was only one choice that would lead to the goal; all others would have been wrong because A leads to B leads to C leads to . . . (If not, the hero becomes all too human and real.) This is wrong. In practically every chain of decisions, there are infinite variations leading to the end, none of which can be accurately predicted or anticipated. Capricious human reaction to any single decision

affects the viability of the remainder of the outcome chain. Again, no guarantee of results.

These books' pronouncements on the wisdom of choices made usually ignores the amount and value of available information at the time. Because business decisions are not made in an environment of perfect current knowledge and full information, let alone understanding and certainty of the future, they are fairly dubious. Stories that suggest decisions were made with assurance of outcome and relevance to the march toward a goal, are fantasies or incipient myths, not history.

The thing about history, of which these books are a particularly popular subset, is that it is a story based on limited parts of the past. The likelihood of an author selecting only the "facts" that support a theory or reputation based on the indisputable power of example, is high. So in the editing process, the history is massaged into a heroic epic.

Of course, there is good to be had from reading these books. Within are often nuggets of information that might help. Reading about others' experiences and actions may trigger thoughts or ideas that could inspire one into new directions, even to success. But, the amount of such wisdom in the typical business history is slight since most are written with the intent to aggrandize or defame

These business history and occasional vanity books are really white-collar voyeurism. They respond to the cult of business celebrity that has been growing rapidly as North Americans have obsessed over business and stock market speculation. We want a glimpse into the way the business "greats" work and live. We seek guidance to replace critical thought and sense. Read it; find it; do it; you shall become it. It rarely works. Buy a textbook instead and use your imagination.

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