

10 Overrated Business Books (and What to Read Instead)

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If you're like most professionals, you've got a stack of business books sitting somewhere near your desk – many of the so-called “classics” that every smart manager supposedly needs to read. Frankly, however, we think that some of these classics became popular not because they were particularly insightful, but because they reinforced conventional business wisdom. Here's our list of overrated classics, broken up by genre. As an alternative to these over-hyped tomes, we've included a suggested reading list that might provide some insights you didn't already know.

Management Consulting

1. #Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution# by Michael Hammer and James Champy (Collins, 2003)

Publisher's blurb: #This book leads readers through the radical redesign of a company's processes, organization, and culture to achieve a quantum leap in performance.#

Excerpt: #Corporations do not perform badly because, as some critics have claimed, workers are lazy and managements are inept. Our record of industrial and technological accomplishment in the last century is proof enough that managements are not inept and workers do work. Ironically, the explanation for why companies perform badly is the identical explanation for why they used to perform so well.#

Why it's overrated: The tautological reasoning (see excerpt) inherent in the reengineering concept immediately became weasel-speak for the downsizing craze, eviscerating companies while producing no lasting value.

Read this instead: #The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam# by Barbara Tuchman (Knopf, 1984)

Why: It gives a great explanation of #cognitive dissonance# – the reason that management fads always fail.

Excerpt: #For the ruler it is easier, once he has entered a policy box, to stay inside. For the lesser official it is better, for the sake of his position, not to make waves, not to press evidence that the chief will find painful to accept.#

2. **#In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies#** by Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman (Harpercollins, 1982)

Publisher's blurb: #Based on a study of forty-three of America's best-run companies from a diverse array of business sectors, describes eight basic principles of management – action-stimulating, people-oriented, profit-maximizing practices – that made these organizations successful.#

Excerpt: #But primarily the ferment is around another stream of thoughts that follows from some startling ideas about the limited capacity of decision makers to handle information and reach what we usually think of as 'rational' decisions, and the even lesser likelihood that large collectives (i.e. organizations) will automatically execute the complex strategic design of the rationalists.#

Why it's overrated: The #excellent# companies mostly went smack down the toilet.

Read this instead: #The Dilbert Principle# by Scott Adams (Harper Business, 1996)

Why: You'll know exactly why #excellent# companies go smack down the toilet.

Excerpt: #Employees like to feel that their contributions are being valued. That's why managers try to avoid that sort of thing. With value comes self-esteem and with self-esteem comes unreasonable requests for money.#

Management Role Models

3. **#Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun#** by Wess Roberts (Grand Central Publishing, 1989)

Publisher's blurb: #In a uniquely creative and entertaining approach to a most serious task, 'Attila' reveals his principles for successful morale building, decision making, delegating and negotiating, and gives advice on overcoming setbacks and achieving goals.#

Excerpt: #The mere presence of the horde often instilled sufficient terror in the people of a region that they abandoned their villages without either resistance or subsequent reprisal. Out of this perplexing and barbaric past rose one of the most formidable leaders the world has known: Attila, King of Huns.#

Why it's overrated: While most managers would love to behead disobedient employees, such behavior reads poorly in the annual report.

Read this instead: #The Art of War# by Sun Tzu (various editions)

Why: If you're going to bloviate about business and warfare, you may as well quote the classic source.

Excerpt: #There are five dangerous faults which may affect a general: (1) recklessness, which leads to destruction; (2) cowardice, which leads to capture; (3) a hasty temper, which can be provoked by insults; (4) a delicacy of honor, which is sensitive to shame; (5) over-solicitude for his men, which exposes him to worry and trouble.#

4. #Jack Welch & the G.E. Way: Management Insights and Leadership Secrets of the Legendary CEO# by Robert Slater (McGraw-Hill, 1998)

Publisher's blurb: #The legendary maverick discusses the traits that led BusinessWeek to anoint Welch, ' the gold standard against which other CEOs are measured.'#

Excerpt: #In order to make General Electric truly competitive, he would have to put it through more dramatic and far-reaching changes that any major American business enterprise had ever undertaken.#

Why it's overrated: GE is an entirely unique organization and Jack Welch was an idiosyncratic leader. What worked for him (there) won't likely work for you (here).

Read this instead: #Crazy Bosses# by Stanley Bing (Collins, 2007)

Why: These are the managers that you're actually going to run into, so you'd better be prepared for them.

Excerpt: #There are two ways to look at it. Either (a) the business world is a sane place dominated by a couple of crazy people who ruin everything or (b) the organizations we serve are basically crazy, and you need to be crazy to manage them. After years of studying the subject, I'm weighing in on (b).#

5. #Jesus CEO# by Laurie Beth Jones (Hyperion, 1995)

Publisher's blurb: #By harnessing three categories of strength behind Jesus' leadership techniques (the strength of self-mastery, the strength of action, and the strength of relationships), each of us can become the empowered leaders that the next millennium will require.#

Excerpt: #I believe that Jesus had to go into the wilderness to find out who he was – that a wilderness experience was as much a part of his shaping and destiny as it is yours and mine.#

Why it's overrated: While many managers think they're God and manage accordingly, the historical Jesus espoused a communal lifestyle in direct opposition to (Roman) capitalism.

Read this instead: #The Book of Proverbs# (in the Bible)

Why: A collection of wisdom that completely transcends religion.

Excerpt: #Better a dry crust and with it peace than a house where feast and dispute go together.#

Management Skills

6. **#The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People# by Steven Covey (Free Press, 1989)**

Publisher's blurb: #Presents a holistic, integrated, principle-centered approach for solving personal and professional problems.#

Excerpt: #The Character Ethic taught that there are basic principles of effective living, and that people can only experience true success and enduring happiness as they learn and integrate these principles into their basic character.#

Why it's overrated: Insufferably sanctimonious.

Read this instead: #The Prince# by Niccolo Machiavelli (various editions)

Why: It will provide you with the precise moral foundation you'll need to be successful on the corporate ladder.

Excerpt: #Upon this a question arises: whether it is better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with.#

7. **#The One Minute Manager# by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson (HarperCollins, 1981)**

Publisher's blurb: #For more than 20 years, millions of managers in Fortune 500 companies and small businesses nationwide have followed *The One Minute Manager's* techniques, thus increasing their productivity, job satisfaction, and personal prosperity.#

Excerpt: #'Effective managers' he thought, 'manage themselves and the people they work with so that both the organization and the people profit from their presence.'#

Why it's overrated: A collection of feel-good bromides and obvious anecdotes that's main benefit is its brevity.

Read this instead: #The Elements of Style# by William Strunk and E.B. White (various editions)

Why: Spend a half-hour reading this tiny book, and you'll learn how to write good business prose.

Excerpt: #Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.#

Personal Development

8. #Who Moved My Cheese# by Spencer Johnson (Putnam Adult, 1998)

Publisher's blurb: #An amusing and enlightening story of four characters who live in a 'Maze' and look for 'Cheese' to nourish them and keep them happy.#

Excerpt: #Two were mice named 'Sniff' and 'Scurry' and two were Littlepeople – beings who were as small as mice but who looked and acted a lot like people today. Their names were 'Hem' and 'Haw.'#

Why it's overrated: Gives the term #cheesy# new meaning.

Read this instead: #How to Lie with Statistics# by Darrell Huff (W.W. Norton, 1954)

Why: If you want to read a short book, this one will open your eyes. You'll never look at a corporate presentation – or the evening news – exactly the same way again.

Excerpt: #No conclusion that '67 percent of the American people are against' something or other should be read without the lingering question, 67 percent of which American people?#

9. #Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work# by Jack Canfield, etc. (HCI, 1996)

Publisher's blurb: #A special collection of inspiring tales that share the daily courage, compassion, and creativity that take place in workplaces everywhere.#

Excerpt: #The thoughtfulness, empathy, and love of this convenience store manager demonstrates vividly that people remember more how much an employer cares than how much the employer pays.#

Why it's overrated: Sentimental treacle has its place, but work is work, not some touchy-feely seminar.

Read this instead: #The Complete 'Yes Minister'# by Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay (BBC Worldwide Americas, 1989)

Why: Based on the popular British TV show, it explains exactly how and why bureaucracies work, whether in governments or corporations. Plus you'll finally understand why the Brits now hate Blair.

Excerpt: #It is the Law of Inverse Relevance: the less you intend to do about something, the more you have to keep talking about it.#

10. #Rich Dad, Poor Dad: What the Rich Teach Their Kids – That You Can Learn Too# by Robert T. Kiyosaki (Time Warner Paperbacks, 2002)

Publisher's blurb: #Will explode the myth that you need to earn a high income to become rich, challenge the belief that your house is an asset [and] teach you what to teach your kids about money for their future financial success.#

Excerpt: #What greatly disturbed me was how little these people [a banker, a business owner, and a computer programmer] knew about either accounting or investing, subjects so important in their lives. I wondered how they managed their own financial affairs in real life.#

Why it's overrated: Own your own business, invest in real estate, don't buy stock and useless crap, and drive a junker car. There, we just saved you \$10.

Read this instead: #A Random Walk Down Wall Street: The Time-Tested Strategy for Successful Investing# by Burton G. Malkiel (W.W. Norton, 2007)

Why: Since you're probably not going to start your own business and you've already got money in the stock market, you'd best know how to invest wisely.

Excerpt: #All investment returns – whether from common stocks or exceptional diamonds – are dependent, to varying degrees, on future events. That's what makes the fascination of investing: It's a gamble whose success depends on an ability to predict the future.#
