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MANAGING BOOKS: TOP TEN OF 2006

Hard facts about this year's books

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Hard facts. Dangerous half-truths. Total nonsense.

Separating one from the other is the essence of managerial success, and often quite difficult. We live in a fast-paced world of anecdote and supposition, in which managers are expected to follow their intuition, make quick decisions, and move on.

But what if we're reacting to dangerous half-truths and total nonsense, rather than hard facts?

The issue is profound, and of particular concern to those who turn to management books for inspiration, since when an idea is turned into book form it acquires an apparent substance that may mask its shaky foundations. For those reasons -- and because it's an excellent, thoughtful, and informative book -- I'm picking *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths & Total Nonsense* (Harvard Business School Press) by Stanford University professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton as the best business book of the year (or, more accurately, in line with their quest for precision, the best of the more than 100 business books I managed to read this year).

The book argues for an evidence-based approach to management, with managers emulating doctors in following the evidence at hand when faced with decisions. It lays out some sensible rules for applying evidence-based management, in the corner office and in management research.

For the final three-quarters of the book it offers an illuminating excursion through some issues where we are prone to accepting half truths or nonsense: Whether work is fundamentally different from the rest of life, do the best organizations have the best people, do financial incentives drive company performance, is strategy destiny, should organizations subscribe to the prevailing belief they must change or die, and are great leaders in control of their organization?

That covers a lot of territory, and sometimes the twists and turns of the research they reveal can be frustrating, like management itself, but it's an intelligent guide to some of the pillars of modern managerial life.

Here are the other books on my top-10 list.

2. Managing the Dynamics of Change (McGraw-Hill): Probably no issue bedevils managers more than dealing with change and University of Southern California social psychologist Jerald Jellison punctures some of the half truths we have about effective change, notably about how and when to best communicate your plans, offering a new approach based on the psychological mindset of the staff members you need to persuade to adapt. It's a more practical, if less flamboyant, approach than generally offered, which we should all consider.

3. The Ultimate Question (Harvard Business School Press): Businesses (and non-profit organizations) struggle with building loyalty among their clientele, and Fred Reichheld, a director emeritus at Bain & Co., has been a pioneer in that field. Here he reveals the one question that his research shows you should be asking clients in your feedback surveys, and then just as importantly shows how companies build operational effectiveness based on the results to the ultimate question.

4. Questions of Character (Harvard Business School Press): In 2002, I picked Harvard ethics professor Joseph Badaracco Jr.'s book *Leading Quietly* as the best book of the year because it didn't have easy answers -- like so many of the dilemmas managers face -- and his latest effort is similar, a meditative essay that takes readers through some classic literature, such as *Antigone* and *Death of A Salesman* to illuminate issues we should be thinking about in evaluating and improving our own character. You don't walk away from it with an eight-point plan for self-development, but the eight works he discusses are fascinating, and it will expand your horizons.

5. Leading Leaders (Amacom): Often leaders have to lead other leaders -- people who are bright, talented, rich and who have the power to resist demands. Jeswald Salacuse, a professor of diplomacy at Tufts University, guides us through those delicate leadership situations, offering some sage advice on the strategic one-on-one conversations that are at the heart of such leadership and then setting out the seven tasks leaders must perform every day to be successful.

6. Get Them on Your Side (Platinum Press): Cornell University professor Samuel Bacharach presents a practical, easy-to-remember, four-pronged approach to managing the momentum once you develop an idea and gain buy-in from your colleagues. Thinking about momentum and its four elements -- structural, performance, cultural and political -- is an interesting way for approaching leadership.

7. Working With You is Killing Me (Warner Business Books): Too much of our time at work is spent ensnarled in emotional traps, as somebody does something that drives us nuts and we can't figure out how to get unhooked. Consultants Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster offer a four-step program to break loose from such situations -- I'm tempted to say easy four-step process, but of course it's never easy -- and they reinforce their model with many examples of how it can be applied in different situations.

8. Questions That Sell (Amacom): It's well known these days that selling depends on asking the right questions. But what questions? Sales trainer Paul Cherry has the answer,

taking readers through the various stages of selling, with examples of questions that help to get your customers talking, position you as an adviser as you educate them about your service and their needs, and clarify the impact of using your offering. There's nothing fancy about the book -- just practical, helpful questions, with explanations of when to use them.

9. A Leader's Legacy (Jossey-Bass): Best-selling authors Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner start at the end -- the legacy you want to create as a leader -- and work back to guide you through some important areas of establishing that legacy: Significance, relationships, aspirations, and courage. It's an inspirational work, focused as the topic areas suggest on broad themes, but with many practical ideas.

10. The Box (Princeton): This is a smoothly written history of the ocean shipping container, something most of us don't spend much time thinking about and wouldn't rush to read about, but economist Marc Levinson turns it into a fascinating economic history of the last 50 years that helps us to understand globalization and industrial growth in North America. It fails to mention, however, the Canadian pioneering entrant in intermodal international transportation in 1953 -- White Pass and Yukon Co. -- three years earlier than the supposed American birth of the industry.

Honourable Mentions

The Emperor has no Hard Hat (MBQ Solutions) by Alan Quilley is a solid guide to improving workplace safety.

Leading at a Higher Level (Prentice Hall) by Ken Blanchard is a comprehensive look at modern leadership, covering such issues as vision, empowerment, self-leadership and performance management.

The Long Tail (Hyperion) by Chris Anderson shows how the traditional approach in some industries is being inverted as companies sell niche items that individually don't amount to much but cumulatively rack up huge numbers.

Hit the Ground Running (McGraw-Hill) by Liz Cornish offers advice to women taking a new post.

Dish (McClelland & Stewart) by Barbara Moses ranges beyond business to look at how mid-age women are faring in work, relationships, and the rest of life.

Focus Like a Laser Beam (Jossey-Bass) by Lisa Haneberg has lots of practical tips -- and a reasonable schema -- for more effective management.

I also loved *Leadership Can Be Taught* (Harvard Business School), in which Sharon Daloz Parks plunges readers into the classroom and world view of Harvard leadership professor Ron Heifetz. But that may be the ex-education reporter in me, since the book's

ideas are often fuzzy and heavily geared to teaching leadership, but I mention it for others with a similar bent.

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Schachter's top-10 books for 2006

- 1.** *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths & Total Nonsense*
- 2.** *Managing the Dynamics of Change*
- 3.** *The Ultimate Question*
- 4.** *Questions of Character*
- 5.** *Leading Leaders*
- 6.** *Get Them on Your Side*
- 7.** *Working With You is Killing Me*
- 8.** *Questions That Sell*
- 9.** *A Leader's Legacy*
- 10.** *The Box*