

How to run a... Publisher and author David Harvey on what makes a good management book.

A

Prior to the Second World War, all the management books ever written could be comfortably stacked on a couple of shelves. Today, you would need a sizeable library, with plenty of room for expansion, to house them. The last few decades have seen the stream of new titles swell into a flood. In 1975, 771 business books were published. By 2000, the total for the year had risen to 3,203, and the trend continues.

B

The growth in publishing activity has followed the rise and rise of management to the point where it constitutes a mini-industry in its own right. In the USA alone, the book market is worth over \$1bn. Management consultancies, professional bodies and business schools were part of this new phenomenon, all sharing at least one common need: to get into print. Nor were they the only aspiring authors. Inside stories by and about business leaders balanced the more straight-laced textbooks by academics. How-to books by practising managers and business writers appeared on everything from making a presentation to developing a business strategy. With this upsurge in output, it is not really surprising that the quality is uneven.

C

Few people are probably in a better position to evaluate the management canon than Carol Kennedy, a business journalist and author of *Guide to the Management Gurus*, an overview of the world's most influential management thinkers and their works. She is also the books editor of *The Director*. Of course, it is normally the best of the bunch that are reviewed in the pages of *The Director*. But from time to time, Kennedy is moved to use *The Director's* precious column inches to warn readers off certain books. Her recent review of *The Leader's Edge* summed up her irritation with authors who over-promise and under-deliver. The banality of the treatment of core competencies for leaders, including the 'competency of paying attention', was a conceit too far in the context of a leaden text. 'Somewhere in this book,' she wrote, 'there may be an idea worth reading and taking note of, but my own competency of paying attention ran out on page 31.' Her opinion of a good proportion of the other books that never make it to the review pages is even more terse. 'Unreadable' is her verdict.

D

Simon Caulkin, contributing editor of the *Observer's* management page and former editor of *Management Today*, has formed a similar opinion. A lot is pretty depressing, unimpressive stuff.' Caulkin is philosophical about the inevitability of finding so much dross. Business books, he says, 'range from total drivel to the ambitious stuff. Although the confusing thing is that the really ambitious stuff can sometimes be drivel.' Which leaves the question open as to why the subject of management is such a literary wasteland. There are some possible explanations.

E

Despite the attempts of Frederick Taylor, the early twentieth-century founder of scientific management, to establish a solid, rule-based foundation for the practice, management has come to be seen as just as much an art as a science. Once psychologists like Abraham Maslow, behaviouralists and social anthropologists persuaded business to look at management from a human perspective, the topic became more multidimensional and complex. Add to that the requirement for management to reflect the changing demands of the times, the impact of information technology and other factors, and it is easy to understand why management is in a permanent state of confusion. There is a constant requirement for reinterpretation, innovation and creative thinking: Caulkin's ambitious stuff. For their part, publishers continue to dream about finding the next big management idea, a topic given an airing in Kennedy's book. *The Next Big Idea*.

F

Indirectly, it tracks one of the phenomena of the past 20 years or so: the management blockbusters which work wonders for publishers' profits and transform authors' careers. Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* achieved spectacular success. So did Michael Hammer and James Champy's book. *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution*. Yet the early euphoria with which such books are greeted tends to wear off as the basis for the claims starts to look less than solid. In the case of *In Search of Excellence*, it was the rapid reversal of fortunes that turned several of the exemplar companies into basket cases. For Hammer's and Champy's readers, disillusion dawned with the realisation that their slash-and-burn prescription for reviving corporate fortunes caused more problems than it solved.

G

Yet one of the virtues of these books is that they could be understood. There is a whole class of management texts that fail this basic test. 'Some management books are stuffed with jargon,' says Kennedy. 'Consultants are among the worst offenders.' She believes there is a simple reason for this flight from plain English. 'They all use this jargon because they can't think clearly. It disguises the paucity of thought.'

H

By contrast, the management thinkers who have stood the test of time articulate their ideas in plain English. Peter Drucker, widely regarded as the doyen of management thinkers, has written a steady stream of influential books over half a century. 'Drucker writes beautiful, dear prose,' says Kennedy, 'and his thoughts come through.' He is among the handful of writers whose work, she believes, transcends the specific interests of the management community. Caulkin also agrees that Drucker reaches out to a wider readership. 'What you get is a sense of the larger cultural background,' he says. 'That's what you miss in so much management writing.' Charles Handy, perhaps the most successful UK business writer to command an international audience, is another rare example of a writer with a message for the wider world.

Questions 1-2

Choose the correct letter, **A, B, C** or **D**.

Write your answers in boxes **1** and **2** on your answer sheet.

1 What does the writer say about the increase in the number of management books published?

- A It took the publishing industry by surprise.
- B It is likely to continue.
- C It has produced more profit than other areas of publishing.
- D It could have been foreseen.

2 What does the writer say about the genre of management books?

- A It includes some books that cover topics of little relevance to anyone.
- B It contains a greater proportion of practical than theoretical books.
- C All sorts of people have felt that they should be represented in it.
- D The best books in the genre are written by business people.

Questions 3-7

Reading Passage 1 has eight paragraphs **A-H**.

Which paragraph contains the following information!

Write the correct letter **A-H** in boxes **3-7** on your answer sheet.

- 3**..... reasons for the deserved success of some books
- 4**..... reasons why managers feel the need for advice
- 5**..... a belief that management books are highly likely to be very poor
- 6**..... a reference to books not considered worth reviewing
- 7**..... an example of a group of people who write particularly poor books

Questions 8-13

Look at the statements (Questions **8-13**) and the list of books below.

Match each statement with the book it relates to.

Write the correct letter **A-E** in boxes **8-13** on your answer sheet.

NB You may use any **letter more than once**.

- 8..... It examines the success of books in the genre.
- 9..... Statements made in it were later proved incorrect.
- 10..... It fails to live up to claims made about it.
- 11..... Advice given in it is seen to be actually harmful.
- 12..... It examines the theories of those who have developed management thinkin
- 13..... It states die obvious in an unappealing way.

List of Books

A Guide to the Management Gurus

B The Leader's Edge

C The Next Big Idea

D In Search of Excellence

E Reengineering the Corporation

Solution:

1. B

2. C

3. H

4. E

5. D

6. C

7. G

8. C

9. D

10. B

11. E

12. A

13. B