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A year's worth of good workplace strategy

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Two books I read in March linger fondly in my mind for their captivating storytelling and rich insights into management.

DisneyWar was cautionary, illuminating what can go wrong in organizations as egos collide, rivalries fester, successors get knifed and miscommunication prevails. It didn't provide any advice for handling these destructive activities but was still useful in dramatizing the dangers.

The other book, *The One Thing You Need to Know*, told how to improve management and leadership in an organization, offering incisive prescriptions. That's why I have chosen it as the best business book of the year:

1 In *The One Thing You Need to Know* (Free Press), Marcus Buckingham takes readers on a fascinating journey to find out the "controlling insights" -- defined as the one thing that explains how to prevail -- about great management, leadership and individual success. He also finds contradictions between the skills required for management and leadership, and says you must pursue intentional imbalance to succeed. The book narrows down all the ideas we hear about leadership, but in an intelligent way. It also illuminates other useful concepts and offers understanding of how to implement those controlling insights.

2 *DisneyWar*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist James B. Stewart (Simon & Schuster), offers a balanced if searing probe into the once wonderful and then not-so-wonderful world of the Walt Disney Co. during Michael Eisner's reign. The story is Shakespearean, as basic elements of human nature cause these celebrity executives to tumble. But the power of the book is understanding that what went wrong at Disney -- from the backstabbing to the disastrous misunderstandings -- could happen, in some form, in your own office, and that good managers have to try to prevent them from turning into a Disney-style civil war.

3 *Winning* by former General Electric Co. head honcho Jack Welch with Suzy Welch (Harper Business) essentially crystallizes leadership into one prime insight -- candour. But then it embellishes that by stressing the importance of differentiation of products and people, communicating mission and values, and ensuring voice and dignity for employees before going on to tackle standard business issues. For every theme touched on -- from strategy to crisis management to getting promoted -- this savvy, practical and legendary ex-CEO offers a list of sensible rules.

4 *Loyalty Myths* by Timothy Keiningham, Terry Vavra, Lerzan Aksoy and Henri Wallard (John Wiley) demolishes ideas we have come to accept as the gospel in developing loyalty-marketing programs, and then offers alternative rules to follow. If you are concerned with customer satisfaction and retention, this book is bound to show ways you are going wrong or could go wrong in the future.

5 *The Baptist Health Care Journey to Excellence* by Al Stubblefield (John Wiley) tells how a mediocre group of non-profit hospitals in Florida turned into one of the perennial leaders in U.S. customer satisfaction scores by creating what so many organizations seek: a cultural transformation. The approach -- listening to staff and building a sense of ownership in employees -- is applicable to any organization, non-profit or for profit.

6 *Competition Demystified* by Bruce Greenwald and Judd Kahn (Portfolio) simplifies Michael Porter's theory of competition, using barriers to entry as the focal point. Examples from famous companies illuminate the book's concepts, and it often gives a different view of the reasons those companies maintain or lost dominance.

7 *Why Great Leaders Don't Take No for an Answer* by Michael Roberto (Wharton School Publishing) argues that to make good decisions you need to carefully craft the decision-making process, ensuring that you hear dissent and conflict over alternative approaches. The book takes you step-by-step through the creation of a productive clash of ideas.

8 *Corporate Confidential* by Cynthia Shapiro (St. Martin's Griffin) purports to tell you 50 secrets that your company doesn't want you to know. Though it's somewhat overblown, it does give employees the lowdown on how to avoid falling afoul of their bosses.

9 *Crucial Confrontations* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler (McGraw Hill) was the book that the managers needed at Walt Disney: a guide to holding those meetings we all prefer to avoid in which broken promises, violated expectations and bad behaviour are discussed openly.

It can help you dampen or prevent the hard feelings that such confrontations usually generate and help ensure they take place in a civil atmosphere.

10 *Deals From Hell* by Robert Bruner (John Wiley) explains why so many mergers turn into fiascos and tells how to prevent such failures.

It focuses on a series of disastrous deals and ostensibly comparable mergers that turned out okay, making it highly readable and illuminating for both the merger expert and general reader.

The runners-up

Time Mastery by John Clemens and Scott Dalrymple (Amacom) offers unconventional perspectives on time and how to use it effectively, albeit in a more philosophical than practical manner.

Get Them on Your Side by Samuel Bacharach (Platinum Press) guides you through the process of winning support for your ideas in your organization and building effective coalitions.

Blue Ocean Strategy by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne (Harvard Business School Press) explains how to lift your company by bringing in new products and services that will have no competitors.

You're in Charge -- Now What? by Thomas Neff and James Citrin (Crown) presents an eight-point plan for coming into a new job.

Corporate Social Responsibility by Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee (John Wiley) maps out the six ways companies can undertake socially responsible programs.

Special note: One of the most interesting -- and bestselling -- books of the year was *Freakonomics* by economist Steven D. Levitt (Morrow), which many have classified as a business book presumably because of the author's profession.

It's definitely worth reading, but it's really a sociological study rather than a business book, so I haven't included it on this list.

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Canadian winners

While these books did not make the top 10, they are notable:

Inside the Boardroom by Richard Leblanc and James Gillies (John Wiley), which illuminates the character types of directors and explains how to use the information to build better boards.

The Codfathers by Globe and Mail reporter Gord Pitts (Key Porter), which chronicles the Atlantic business elite and their impact on Canada.

Passionate Visionary by Richard Ascough and Sandy Cotton (Novalis), which offers leadership lessons from the Apostle Paul.

The NEXT Sustainability Wave by Bob Willard (New Society Press), which explains how to persuade your company to take environmental sustainability more seriously.

Super Skills for Supervisors, by Frank Buchar (Authorhouse), a fable in which a group of supervisors learn how to improve their skills.

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