
CHAPTER

1

Business Books Suck

We've all been there. Your manager or the CEO or the head of HR has read a new business book. God help us.

All of a sudden, there they are on stage in the company all-hands meeting, gesticulating like a madperson, talking about some dude who climbed Everest and dropping bombs about what it's like to make decisions when you're "low on oxygen in white-out conditions."

Hold up. . . Everest is now floating in the ocean? Ohhh! It's now a floating glacier. We've gone maritime. We're talking about how 80 percent of glaciers are below the surface—"people, processes, and technology." You're trying to keep up with the shifting metaphor, but you're drowning in the cold, glacial sea of this all-hands rant.

Now we're on a boat sailing toward the glacier? Or maybe it's the competition sailing at us and we're the glacier? Someone is about to hit this glacier; it's unclear who at this point.

When the town hall is over, the leader has basically given the world's worst business book report disguised as a motivational speech. Meanwhile, you've gotta trot back to your desk and make heads or tails of how ramping a glacier in a Zodiac boat is supposed to change how you allocate your budget across hiring and software spend. Good luck.

Do business books ever make our lives better? Or do they just lead to the world's worst company all-hands meetings and even worse decision-making? We've all been "managed by a business book," which is worse than having to read the book yourself.

But why do business books suck so bad? Oh, let me count the ways.

1. **"Swoop and poop" by analogy books:** These books often derive their authority from things that have nothing to do with your day-to-day leadership experience. The author is a mountain climber turned entrepreneur, they're a professional athlete turned venture capitalist, they're a military hero turned motivational speaker who sleeps four hours a night but it's OK because they're pinning a gram of exogenous testosterone on the regular.

Ninety percent of their leadership advice comes from their former life, which they try to translate from the football pitch to the boardroom. It doesn't work, much the same way my experience caring for a corgi doesn't make me qualified to write a parenting book. You probably know more than these people about leading in your actual job. They're just "swooping and pooping" little nuggets of wisdom from another field like "When visibility on the mountain is low, trust your team/training/coach/instincts" and hoping it lands. It's like a horoscope—vague enough that they rely on you to make the connections to your job. But they'll take credit if it all works out for you. If the advice doesn't work out, well, you misapplied it.

2. **“Great businessman” books:** I use the word *man* here because it so often is some dude. These books at least are written by someone in business. Often for them lightning has struck once, maybe twice. Maybe more. And they’re telling their story of success mixed with a bit of learnings and takeaways. They simplify a complex tale that led to their success in order to produce a myth of themselves that comes complete with takeaways for you to try. The cast of characters is reduced. Errors are minimized. Right decisions are distilled to general principles.

Too often, the takeaways are overly specific to *someone with their personality*. Oh, you worked 100-hour weeks and slept in the office? You likely were already a Disc D, Enneagram 3 or 8, ENTJ hard-charger. You took some time off when faced with your next challenge and went to Burning Man? Cool bro. Sometimes these books veer off into historical figure worship as do so many business books: throw in a little “Churchill slept only 4 hours a night” or “Jobs wore the same thing every day to streamline his life.”

These books leave the reader wrestling with whether their success as a leader is predicated on a seemingly impossible personality and behavioral transformation.

You know that guy Al Dunlap I talked about in the introduction who executed a large accounting fraud when his “chainsaw” tactics failed him? Before the SEC investigated him, he published a *New York Times* bestseller titled *Mean Business: How I Save Bad Companies and Make Good Companies Great*. You see the “I” in that title? That’s that “great businessman” type of book I’m talking about.

3. The **academic study “insight porn” as unifying theory of leadership book:** These suckers are at least grounded in more than just a singular experience. But they’ll often take a single study or a single survey and blow it out of proportion.

These books use “insight porn” tactics where the study being cited gives a nonintuitive result that shocks the reader into reevaluating all that they know. There’s a mountaintop guru a-ha moment. Do more by doing less, lead from behind, the best defense is a good offense, etc. They turn the world on its head. It can be a fun format!

Hey, it’s really interesting that on sales teams if you promote a high performer to manager, you’re just as likely to fail as if you promote a low performer or hire from the outside. But can we really apply that to all hiring and promotion in all disciplines? Perhaps product management or technology management have nothing to do with sales management. Since I’m in a vague, nonquota trade, I’m pretty sure the takeaways aren’t generalizable.

These kinds of books can be educational and helpful but also dangerous because they hand you an academically backed chainsaw, a singular tool or worldview that you can now apply to all situations and appear enlightened. But remember, academic studies often use analogs to generalize findings. There are studies that use how well mice swim as an analog for the efficacy of antidepressants in humans. Let’s be reasonable in how much we allow academic studies to generalize what it means to be good leaders in business. (I say this as someone who really likes academia and enjoys a good study.)

- 4. Super Soul Sunday turned business book:** These are similar to the academic books mentioned. You take someone on the periphery of business leadership, perhaps an executive coach or psychologist, and have them create a “unifying theory of leadership” that centers around behavior, personal growth, and psychological phenomena. The formula is something like this: take a trendy self-help/self-care topic, like

how to process shame, how to have better conversations in the midst of conflict, or techniques for handling anxiety, and project those insights onto the entirety of business as the key to unlock successful and sustainable outcomes.

The insights can often be helpful but only tangentially. It's like nutrition. The primary drivers of health are big things like total calorie intake, macronutrient distribution, sleep, and exercise. Micronutrients like vitamin C matter secondarily (no one wants scurvy!), but you better believe there's a book out there on how vitamin C is the secret to everything. The business world is full of such things: micro-insights around personality and behavior being projected into macro-insights. Meditation is an excellent tool for leaders, but I know tons of excellent leaders who do not meditate. So let's not make that the key to becoming better.

The truth is that each and every one of these books has a few nuggets that are likely helpful! I've read plenty of business books in each of these categories and have benefitted to a degree.

How many of you have ever read a business book and found it helpful in most hard business situations going forward? So helpful that you're able to remember that thing you listened to at 1.5x speed even a year later? The shelf life of a business book inside that skull of yours is probably "until I read the next business book."

These things have limited applicability, because their grand theories are based on specific truths too small to encompass all that leadership entails in our context. Furthermore, acting as though their limited and narrow takeaways are universal keys to business success actually leads these books to be less helpful! Their word count increases, and they strain the bounds of how their takeaways might be metaphorically (mis)applied. And all of

a sudden, a 3,000-word essay on time management becomes a 50,000-word grand theory on organizational efficiency as the secret sauce to success.

Business books suck not in that their small nuggets are wrong but in that they try to make their small nuggets everything!

So if that's the case, what's the alternative?

Context Is Everything: Do Things That [Don't?] Scale

I was raised in the conservative evangelical church during the 90s. And at that time there was a phrase that struck fear into the hearts of all evangelicals: “moral relativism.” This is the idea that what is right and what is wrong is “relative” to the context you're in. If picking your nose is wrong, the 90s evangelical church would say it's *always* wrong! The heroes of the church were the uncompromising—William Wallace came up *a lot*. Not the historical figure, mind you, mostly just Mel Gibson's uncompromising portrayal. Either you could be a “person of principle” or you could be Machiavelli.

It's easy to see why such an approach to religious education is attractive. What's going to produce more “reliable” results? Encouraging folks to engage critically and contextually with the world or giving folks a set of rules by which they must act in every situation without question? For a lot of folks, there's relief in the clarity provided by rigidity. Personal responsibility is lifted when you're made into a dogmatic robot.

It's not just the 90s evangelical church that doesn't like relativism, or, as this book will put it, **contextual decision-making**. Westerners generally, religious or not, *really do not like relativism* as a rule. Why? We like everything to be organized and logical;

we like the advice we're given to be boiled down to a set of "if, then" statements. If this happens, then do this. Works every time.

This reduces doubt and personal responsibility. It doesn't matter whether we're talking cooking, religion, child rearing, or business. We all love a good instruction manual.

I have some good friends who recently had a child, and they signed up for a service called "Moms on Call," which they paid for well into their kid's toddler years. The service had a fascinating business model: call us, and we'll tell you what to do.

Parenting is scary! It's some of the hardest leadership many of us will ever engage with. Lots of ambiguity. Lots of complexity. Stakes are very high; another person is depending on you for everything! People just want to know *what do I do*. And so Moms on Call provides direct answers, it provides instructions, increases confidence, and reduces responsibility. Phew!

And at the heart of all these business books, we find the same phenomenon: **a market rising up to meet the demand for instruction manuals in the face of uncertainty**. Business books try to give you specific rules to live by 100 percent of the time. Go harder, lean in, amp it up. Engage in conflict like this. Manage employees like that.

In a way, business books *have to be this way*. After all, who wants to buy a book whose advice is, "it depends?"

Well, suckers, got you! I hope you checked this out from the library because if you paid for this thing and were expecting a list of instructions, you just wasted a couple bucks! You see, the whole premise of this book is: *it depends*. Context is king.

But let me show you that you already believe this. Deep down, you know that there's no rigid framework, however complex, that can be applied to make a good decision in every context.

Paul Graham, tech billionaire and Y Combinator founder, once said, "Do things that don't scale." Everyone loves that quote

in the tech startup world. It means that you should be inefficient and ramp up fast to figure out whether something is going to work, have product market fit, etc. Often this is translated into “throwing bodies” at a problem that should be scaled technologically, but you just don’t want to spend the time on that until you know whether it’s worth it.

Makes sense, right? I do this all the time! Recently, at Podium, where, as CPO, I’m responsible for our product road map, we launched a VoIP system for local businesses. Our phone system is awesome because it integrates with all the other software we offer, such as texting, payments, marketing, etc. When the customer calls in, we pop open a caller ID that gives the business all the information they need about the caller (what have they purchased, did they review you on Google, what did you last chat about, etc.). What business wouldn’t want that? But changing out a phone system, well, that’s a pain in the ass.

Changing phone systems has all sorts of operational complexities for local businesses, so we threw Podium bodies at the problem. All sorts of folks with different job titles jumped in to help early customers test their network speeds, port their phone lines to Podium, and change over their phone hardware to our new service. We knew that wouldn’t scale efficiently. But we did it anyway to learn fast. Before you spend millions of dollars and person hours writing code, maybe you should see whether the new go-to-market motion you’re trying even works!

Counterpoint: “Do things *that scale*,” says Parker Conrad, founder of Zenefits and Rippling. I’m pretty sure he’s a billionaire too. We have a battle of billionaire adages, folks!

Parker tried doing “things that don’t scale” at Zenefits. He found that then going back and scaling operations efficiently that had already been ossified using human labor was often intractable. In the effort to scale fast, humans create systems that are

difficult to replace with machines later (after all, we like job security!). So at his next company, he decided the best way to go was to do things right from the get-go. He built Rippling on code, not warm bodies.

Do things that scale. That pays off in the long term. Makes sense.

So! Which is right?

Honestly, they're **both true even though they contradict each other**. There are contexts where you should throw bodies at a problem to test something, and there are contexts where that creates more problems than it solves.

But what business book is going to say, “Y’all, do things that don’t scale unless that’s gonna get you in trouble later, and in that case, do things that scale.”?

Well, this book is going to say that later, so let me rephrase that question: what business book that wants to sell more than 10 copies to the author’s family members would ever say such a thing? (Hi, Mom!)

It’s not that business books are wrong or right. It’s that they’re often right *some of the time*. But they purport to be right *all of the time*. And so you can’t become a better leader by reading one. You’ve got to read a business book, read its opposite, and then be the kind of leader who knows when to pull from which book!

This subtle shift from “right some of the time” to “right in all contexts” is at the core of why business books suck. Business books create leaders who are a dangerous combination of the following:

- **Inattentive:** Takes the responsibility off the leader to fully understand a situation and be judicious in that moment. They simply pattern match to the business book they like and then shoot from the hip.

- **Overconfident:** “Right in some contexts” provides options for a leader. It makes them more equipped. “Right in all contexts” simply makes a leader overconfident that they have the answers.

Inattentive yet overconfident leaders are truly the worst. I bet if you look around in your personal life and in the broader business world and in politics and in religion and on and on, you’ll see that it’s these inattentive yet overconfident blowhards that we so often laud.

Additionally, there’s another confounding issue with business books: confirmation bias. Guess who tends to buy business books that claim success lies merely in leaning in and working harder? People who already drive hard!

Guess who tends to buy business books that claim success lies in the softer side of things, like empathetic leadership and having difficult but necessary conversations? Folks already prone to self-reflection and leadership by relationship!

The people who bought Al “The Chainsaw” Dunlap’s *Mean Business* were the folks who like wielding chainsaws. We buy management books that affirm our tendencies rather than books that challenge us.

This leads to a leader whose bag of tools for solving problems specializes and calcifies over time rather than creating leaders who pull from tools they didn’t even know about a couple years prior.

Business books have created echo chambers where specialist leaders hear what they want to hear and keep acting the way they’ve always acted. It’s a recipe for a glacier metaphor in a town hall, and nobody wants that.

What If I Said That Bad Leaders Are Too Consistent?

The leadership personas we laud in business are all mythical. Jobs, Carnegie, Walton, you name them, none of them real.

The images we've created of them in order to make snackable leadership models out of them are images that are far too *monolithic*. They become archetypes who often behave in our literature the same way in each situation.

Jobs wore the same thing every day, ate the same thing, was always difficult to please, was always design-first (business and functionality be damned), etc.

Chris Rock has a famous stand-up routine where he talks about how every time he had an ailment or an injury, his dad would just recommend Robitussin. Cancer? Robitussin. Broken leg? Rub some Robitussin on it.

It's an absurd and hilarious portrait of a father taking a thing with limited applications and making it a panacea. But that's literally *what bad leaders do*.

Because what's another way to describe a leader who behaves the same way in all circumstances?

That's a leader who doesn't hear people. That's a leader who doesn't learn. That's a leader who's unwilling to "get into the weeds."

It's a garbage leader.

Yet those caricatures are our heroes. What should we take away from the nearly fictionalized Churchill who *never gave up*? Well, considering your job isn't fighting nazis but might be building enterprise SaaS software, I'd hope not much.

When I was a boy, I liked to play *Street Fighter 2* with my older brother. *Street Fighter* is a two-player fighting game similar

to *Mortal Kombat*. I sucked so bad at *Street Fighter 2*. So every time we played, I'd just take my character, crouch down, and try to "sweep the leg" of my brother à la *Karate Kid*. Let's just say that my competition got wise to me. My older brother learned to just jump the sweep and kick me in the head. I lost over and over and over again. Consistency led me not to victory but to defeat.

The authoritarian leader in all contexts is an asshole.

The servant leader in all contexts has abdicated their authority.

The "in-the-weeds" leader in all contexts is a micromanager and a control freak.

The "30,000-foot" leader in all contexts is out of touch and probably kinda stupid.

The people-first leader in all contexts is likely to drive cancerously high employee retention and free riding.

The performance-first leader in all contexts is likely to drive burnout and high turnover.

OK, you're probably tracking at this point.

Business books are echo chambers that create unhealthy levels of leadership "consistency" leading to bad outcomes for all involved.

Introducing Wisdom Literature

"Do things that don't scale." Absolutely.

"Do things that scale." Yup. On board.

What's going on?

Well, I propose that there's a whole genre of literature that's more helpful than business books for understanding how, so often, a piece of advice and its opposite can be helpful. And that genre is called *wisdom literature*. I first learned about wisdom literature from talking with my wife who's a pastor and who reads

Hebrew and Greek and stuff. She talked me through this whole genre of literature, and it was extremely foreign to me, a boring old businessperson. As a pastor, she was faced with considering moral dilemmas (the hardest of decision-making problems) all the time, but the literature she was pulling from was absolutely not written by Al “The Chainsaw” Dunlap. She kept referring to the ancient wisdom texts instead.

Wisdom literature originated thousands of years ago in the ancient near east (ANE). And its purpose was to turn little princes into future wise rulers. But it didn’t necessarily do this through telling these little princes what to do. Instead, it had them struggle with tough dilemmas. You don’t build bigger muscles by watching an instructional video; you build bigger muscles by getting under the bar and struggling yourself!

Take, for example, the “Dialogue between a Man and His God,” which is a text written in Akkadian on a clay tablet from 1600s BCE Babylon. The author of the text wrestles with why a god that he worships and sacrifices to permits evil to happen to him. It’s an age-old question: why do bad things happen to good people? Young princes needed to wrestle with the seeming injustice inherent in life itself.

And guess what? *The answer is never given* as to why this god has permitted their servant to suffer! The tablet merely lays out that this kind of thing happens. It’s up to the reader then to wrestle with the implications.

Wisdom literature as a genre is more interested in giving the reader a headache, destabilizing their confidence and their surety, than it is in giving them pat answers to problems. Wisdom literature creates humility in the face of the unsolvable. It created young princes who recognized that there were going to be problems in life (like the anger of the gods) for which no amount of Robitussin would suffice.

And that humility makes for good leadership.



Source: Historien spécialiste du bassin minier du Nord-Pas-de-Calais JÄNNICK Jérémy / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain. (GNU Free Documentation License)

The Facebook Uncle Dilemma

Why gods permit suffering isn't terribly handy as a topic for this book. That's a different section of Barnes & Noble. Instead, let's turn our attention to your crazy uncle. I know you've got one. We all do these days.

Uncle Carl is on Facebook. Oh no. He's talking about how "the politicians are in league with the lizard people to hide the

fact that the world is actually flat.” He’s linking to dubious sites. I’m pretty sure all of them are trying to install malware while also peddling conspiracies.

His most recent post has really gotten under your skin. He’s suggesting a local leader, maybe your church’s pastor, your mayor, your dean, is in league with this reptilian, otherworldly enemy that somehow has something to do with George Soros. You feel yourself getting a little hot under the collar.

What do you do in response to your uncle?

In business book land, you could find a book that would say something like this:

“Don’t suffer fools gladly!”

Nothing like some King James Corinthians for figuring out your approach to Facebook uncles. I put that quote in Comic Sans to prevent you from photographing it and posting it to your Instagram story as inspiration for the masses.

Meanwhile, back in business book land, you could easily find another book that would say this:

Never wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty, and the pig likes it.

Cool. Don’t wrestle pigs, but don’t suffer fools.

Well, wisdom literature as a genre would simply nod its head at both viewpoints. Let’s look at the book of *Proverbs*, one of the most famous wisdom literature books of all time, which is part of the *Ketuvim* in the Hebrew Bible.

Proverbs 26:4-5:

Answer not a fool according to their folly, lest you be like them yourself.

Answer a fool according to their folly, lest they be wise in their own eyes.

So. . .don't answer your uncle. Don't be brought down to his level! After all, it'll just validate him that somehow his position is credible enough to deign arguing with.

Wait. . .“answer a fool?” I thought Proverbs just said not to answer him! OK, so you've got to answer him so that he doesn't go on making an ass of himself. Or hell, your grandma reads his posts. . .maybe you need to answer him just so she sees that not everyone agrees with his hot takes.

The purpose of wisdom literature isn't to tell you *what to think*. It's to give you **options**, experiences, and spectrums of action. The rest is up to you! Wisdom literature, unlike business books, admits that life is complex, and the situations you find yourself in require a nuanced understanding of the context in order to act.

Only you know how your uncle might react. Only you know who else is reading his posts and commenting on them who might be deceived. Only you know if you have a good enough relationship with your uncle that he might be receptive to your words.

So as a leader, you get to decide which *option* to apply in this circumstance.

That's what it means to be a leader. That's why a robot that's read a bunch of business books will forever suck at leading. You have to understand what's going on in the moment just as well as you need to understand that audiobook you listened to on your commute if you're going to make the right call.

Modern business books often give knowledge, which is to say specific pieces of information (facts, processes, frameworks) useful for **deterministic** decision-making.

Wisdom literature, I'd contend, acknowledges that in a complex world, leaders don't make deterministic decisions. We play with *probabilities* in complex situations with imperfect information. We do this by collecting and evaluating *options*. You're going to hear the word *option* a lot in this book.

Recently, I had two “B-players” on my team at work. Now, we’ve all heard the phrase “A-players only” in business. Netflix is perhaps most famous for its “A-players only” hiring and firing practices. There’s probably a book or two out there touting the principle. I like it! But nevertheless, I had hired two Bs. What was I going to do with them?

Should I just take the principle and apply it writ large? One of the B players seemed to be stuck in amber. No matter how much coaching they received, they remained a B. Good, not great.

The other B player was trending down, but when given feedback, they got their ass in gear and were moving up into B+ territory. With the former, we fired them. With the latter, we merely told them they weren’t cutting it, but we envisioned that they could make it to an A if they applied themselves. They acknowledged they’d been a little checked out, and their heart wasn’t in it. In the end, they chose to leave the business of their own accord.

You see, a business book will tell you to fire a D player. They’ll even tell you to generally fire the B player. But what about that *specific* B player you have? The one who used to be an A and then their job description changed based on company needs. Are they trending back up? Trending down? Holding steady? Maybe their failure to adapt is your fault? They just need training. They just need a plan, etc., etc. We’ve entered the realm of complex decision-making. This is where we leave our books somewhat behind, and we’re on our own.

This isn’t to say that wisdom literature is the only place we see such an outlook on the world. Maybe wisdom persists today. . . just not in business books. After all, Kenny Rogers didn’t say “hold ’em!” Instead, he presented the options.

You’ve gotta know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em.

Those are the options. And it’s on you based on the context to decide. Ack! Poker relativism! Bad Kenny. Bad.

In my opinion, the best leaders, the “wise” leaders, are ones who engage well in **options-based decision-making**, which is to say, nondeterministic decision-making processes. Robotic leaders often fail, especially in situations in which the context rapidly shifts such that the game being played is different from month to month and year to year.

Good leadership is dynamic and contextual. Done well, that’s what it means to have “wisdom!” It’s beyond knowledge, beyond frameworks, beyond doing the same thing every time because that’s how you’ve been trained.

And that sets up our next chapter. Let’s illustrate with examples why there really is *no shake-and-bake way to lead*.