

A BIBLIOPHILE'S CHALLENGE: THE 100-BOOK EXPERIMENT

By Jonathan Cullen

I almost made it. In late 2015, I committed to read more in order to better counsel my organization. I have always been an avid reader of fiction, but as John Coleman writes in his 2012 Harvard Business Review article, “For those who want to lead, read.” So I challenged myself to read or listen to 100 non-fiction books in 2016.

I wasn't about to plough through two books a week simply for intellectual curiosity; I wanted it to benefit my organization and my CCCA peers. My best decision was to read widely: besides management, leadership and strategy, many of the best lessons came from economics, history, politics and memoirs. Even at the cost of library penalties, an embarrassing number of Amazon deliveries and broken ear buds, it was worth every late night.

However, despite herculean effort and a holiday season binge, I only managed to

inhale 85 books, with 13 remaining partly digested. I now turn to the task of distilling the learnings for you over the course of this year—and perhaps rekindle your passion for the written word.

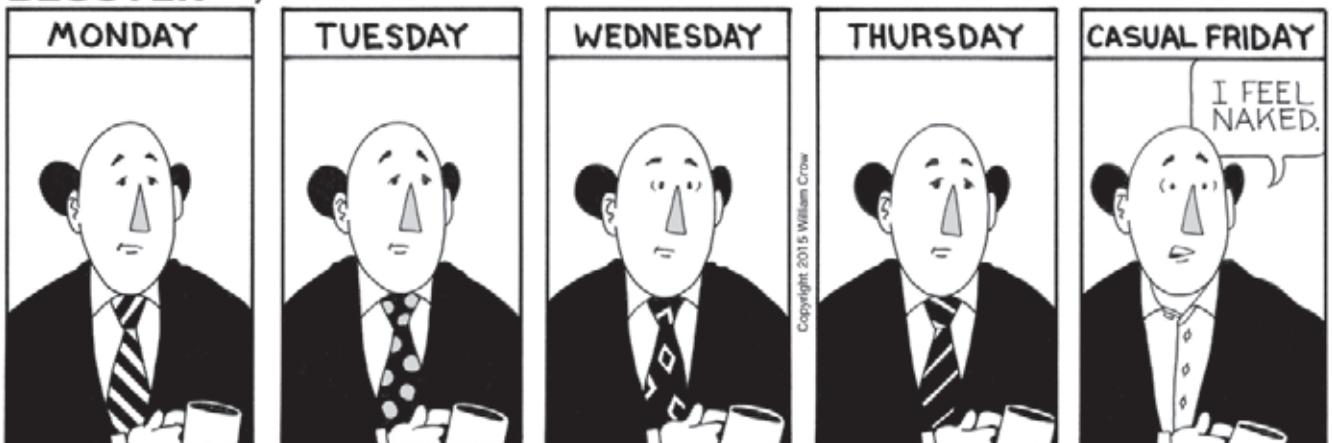
Let's begin with any insights from my literary odyssey that might help safeguard our businesses:

1. THE META INSIGHT: The central lesson didn't come from the books; it came from the process: reading is fantastic. Mindful of Mark Twain's admonition, “The differ-

ence between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and lightning,” my lawyer's toolbox has been restocked with fresh words, turns of phrase and quips. I also marveled at the ability of good writers to convey complex meaning in simple words—a critical in-house skill. Doris Kearns Goodwin's biography of Abraham Lincoln, *Team of Rivals*, is a showcase of the power of Lincoln's brevity.

2. ONCE IS ENOUGH. It only takes one negative event to shatter an organization's carefully built reputation. In working to guard against this, I'll now forever recall Bill Bryson's advice from *A Walk in the Woods*: “Black bears rarely attack. But here's the thing. Sometimes they do. All bears are agile, cunning and immensely strong, and they are always hungry. That doesn't hap-

BLUSTER by William Crow



pen often, but—and here is the absolutely salient point—once would be enough.”

3. WHEN SOMETHING IS NOT STRATEGY. “Strategic” is probably the most mystical word in today’s conference room. Learn to recognize false or poor strategy through the lenses of *Playing to Win* or *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy*. Enter your management consultant’s head with *Lords of Strategy*. Gain invaluable historical insights into how leaders steer large organizations in *Six Days of War*, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus* and *The Guns of August*. The 100-year anniversary of Canada’s most glorious military victory is the perfect year to read venerated Canadian historian Pierre Berton’s *Vimy*. The most underrated strategic learning opportunity for lawyers is, of course, chess and the biography of controversial yet brilliant Bobby Fischer in *Endgame* reads like a Cold War spy novel.

4. EMBRACE MISTAKES. “There should be no shame in admitting to a mistake; after all, we really are only admitting that we are now wiser than we once were,” author Greg McKeown advises. Honest (and less than honest) memoirs are a treasure trove for understanding decision-making, and U.S. political history offers plenty. Nixon’s *In the Arena* is an incredible juxtaposition of astute managerial insight and candid admissions of failure, sprinkled with continued indignation. I could not look away. Works by U.S. Secretaries of Defense in *Known and Unknown* and *Duty*, and presidential reflections in Carter’s *Keeping Faith* and Bush’s *Decision Points* provide context for today’s geopolitical reality. Robert

McNamara’s dissection of the errors of the Vietnam War in his *In Retrospect* should be required reading for any leader.

5. KNOW PEOPLE. In-house lawyers don’t counsel companies; we counsel people. Gaining insight into people’s behaviour makes us better advisors. Rhodes Scholar and marine veteran Karl Marlantes offers an exceedingly rare and honest examination of humanity in *What It Is Like to Go to War*.

alds, “you cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything.” The building of the Brooklyn Bridge, as told in *The Great Bridge*, is a manifesto of ruthless prioritization. It also sometimes takes courage to do the right thing for your organization. *Washington: A Life* shows how easily the world’s first democracy could have become an empire but for the courage and humility of its first leader who refused a crown.

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In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl poignantly reflects, “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Authors like these, who have lived at the very edge of human experience, grant us the unique gift of distilling otherwise ethereal concepts into practical insights. People can also be understood in the context of our winding anthropological history, described with aplomb in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.

6. BE COURAGEOUS AND PRIORITIZE. In *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, McKeown challenges us to distinguish “the vital few from the trivial many” and, in my favourite advice, her-

As Steven Pressfield does in the *War of Art*, I ask of reading, “Of any activity you do, ask yourself: If I were the last person on earth, would I still do it?” Today’s in-house counsel is a busy strategic business advisor, with barely enough time to find a clean shirt. Yet, my answer is emphatically yes. I will always make time for the intellectual pursuit of reading, for both its own virtue and the value it brings my business.

Now back to those unread books. ■

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