

Book Review for 7/26/04 by John Gould

Title: "Do Lunch or Be Lunch"

Author: Howard Stevenson with Jeffrey Cruikshank

Publisher: Harvard Business School Press

Length: 227 pages

Price: \$24.95

Reading time: 5 hours

Reading rating: 7 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

"Do Lunch or Be Lunch" is a book about the habits that people and organizations form that govern the way they behave and conduct business. Mark Twain once observed that habits are not to be flung out of the window; rather, they are to be coaxed downstairs one step at a time. The author agrees and maintains that habits translate to predictability. There is no such thing as the past in taking action since action affects only the future. It may be a future measured by minutes, or it may be a future measured by years, but every action we take is an attempt to shape the future. The reason we set an alarm clock is to get up on time to create the future.

Habits can be useful predictive tools. They can provide the basis for explaining what has happened in the past, for lending insight into how we think about our options, and for guiding our attempts to predict the future.

The need and ability to predict seem to separate us from our fellow creatures. We are not the only species to have opposing digits or advanced communications skills over long distances. Also, we may not be the only species that has a concept of the future. However, what distinguishes us is our ability to contemplate a variety of futures over varying time frames. This predictive quality allows us to survive and prosper. To modify Descartes, the author states that I predict, therefore I will be.

In the very dark ages, our ancestors worried about dangers lurking behind rocks. Today, we face different challenges for survival. The author contends that we arrange our thought processes to deal more effectively with these challenges, i.e. we continue to enhance our ability to predict the future, often at sacrifice of comfort or personal gain. In a phrase, if we have the ability to predict the future, we have the power to choose to eat or be eaten. In short, the ability to predict is power.

As the business world expands and becomes more complex, our ability to predict becomes less individualistic and more organizational. In his book, the author argues that managers increase their effectiveness by being more predictable. If you and I act effectively, honestly, and humanely, we become mutually predictable. And that is power. Having that power is not an option, but a necessity. In other words, you and I had better understand each other.

The author contends that many treatises on effective management eventually succumb to the formula disease: do these eight things and all will be well. As events change, as they inevitably do, we have to be flexible enough to think anew in order to maintain mutual predictability. Despite his aversion to the formula disease, the author writes that there are three standards that are necessary for building mutual predictability:

- Clarity. As relationships change and new people and organizations enter our lives, we need to make sure that we are clear to each other. Do not assume that we mean the same thing merely because we use the same words.

- Consistency. It's not good enough to be clear on occasion. Predictability depends on clarity over time. This is an identity goal. Being consistent makes you predictable to those around you and, according to the author, better at what you do.

- Competence. Becoming better at what you do allows you to base your model on how the world really works. It also keeps you out of Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Becoming really good at doing something makes life fun and variety unthreatening.

The author ends his book with a big question. In contemplating any action, am I making my life more or less predictable for those who depend on me and on whom I must depend.

John Gould is a retired partner of Ernst & Young and is a visiting professor of accounting in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books, visit our Website at www.wcu.edu/cob/bookreviews.