

Editor's Column – Ruth Ann Woodley

Book Reviews

Clients for Life: Evolving from an Expert-for-Hire to an Extraordinary Advisor, by Jagdish N. Sheth and Andrew Sobel

Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion, by Robert B. Cialdini

I have always been an avid reader, but have rarely read business books and even more rarely enjoyed them. However, since becoming a consultant in a small firm and having less interaction with colleagues, managers, and mentors, I am reading more as another way of getting business advice and ideas. I've recently read a couple of books that I found quite rewarding and thought I would share them.

The first is Clients for Life, which describes the vast difference between consultants who spout out facts and recommendations from afar and those who come to truly understand their client companies and help them to reach deeper insights about their business. Harry Hopkins, FDR's right-hand-man, is the opening example. Since he's famous for the fact that he lived in the White House and was with the President constantly, despite poor physical health, Hopkins probably is the ultimate extraordinary advisor. (In fact, he was more extraordinary than I want to be!)

Sheth and Sobel did extensive research with both prominent consultants and with company executives who are clients. They developed a list of common traits seen in the best advisors and describe how the traits are developed and how they set these top advisors apart. Some of the traits are self-evident, but a few can be counter-intuitive or are at least not always our first reaction in interactions with real clients. For example, they point out that great advisors are not specialists in a narrow area, but generalists with a broader perspective. That one was a good reminder to me that while actuarial consultants are hired for very specialized skills, we serve our clients much better if we can understand and communicate how they should apply our findings in their business strategy and operations. Even the book's points that I did already know were a good reminder and inspired me to reach for the highest level of service every day.

Robert Cialdini probably didn't write Influence to be a "business book," and many of the lessons are applicable as much or more in other areas of life. But his discussion of the thought patterns that unconsciously drive many of our decisions, and ways marketers in all industries have for manipulating these, is extremely useful. In many cases it would be unethical to use the techniques described to influence our clients, and Cialdini's goal is to arm the reader against them. But many more of the "weapons" described can have very positive applications, like showing you which aspects of a valuable service should be highlighted to make it most attractive to your customers. I came away from the book embarrassed at the number of times I had fallen for some of the more nefarious tricks, but better armed for the future personally and on the job.

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