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Lessons from the Sandbox

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Book Review

Ed Chung

Alan Gregerman, *Lessons from the Sandbox*, Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2000.

Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy both had vice presidents named Johnson. Lincoln and Kennedy both had seven letters in their last names. Both were elected in years ending with 60. And, both met with tragic and untimely deaths.

The uninitiated may well be tempted to conclude, therefore, that anyone aspiring to be president of the United States had better count the number of letters in their last name, not run for election in a year ending with 60, and definitely not choose a Johnson as a running mate.

If only life were so simple. Or simplistic.

But simplistic is precisely what *Lessons from the Sandbox* has to offer.

This book is a must read for anyone interested in how consultants sell their ephemeral ideas, and how sound bites and not substance sell books. (Being the amoral and superficial marketer, of course I am.) I also find *Lessons* a very useful book for reminding us of the joy of parenting very young kids. But as a "powerful and refreshing new formula for business success" (inside book jacket), *Lessons* ranks up there with such definitive works as *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Star Trek*, *The Popcorn Report*, and *One Minute Manager*. All of them extremely well written, all providing a nice title with a strong hook, and all of them about as effectual as the castle my kid built in his sandbox.

According to Gregerman, the keys to business success can be found by observing how children play. In essence, think, act, and play like a kid, and you will be successful. Now that indeed is a powerful message. We can have our cake and eat it, too! Gregerman offers 13 "Big Lessons" for business folk (summarized on p. 235):

1. You can only do really good work if you enjoy what you are doing.
2. Enthusiasm about something worth doing is powerful, contagious, and essential.
3. Know where you are going and why you want to go there.
4. Matters of the greatest importance require urgency and persistence.
5. Leaders create the context in which real magic happens.

6. You can only reach your full potential when you start to see a world filled with wonder and possibilities.
7. You can only reach your full potential when you start to scratch beneath the surface of things worth understanding.
8. You can only learn and grow if you are willing to ask a lot of good questions.
9. You can only learn and grow if you are willing to try new things.
10. Creativity is the one key to making a real difference.
11. When you have a chance to participate and use your special gifts, you can do amazing things.
12. Cozy and comfortable places are the best spots for creating magic.
13. Nothing is more powerful than the gift of accomplishment.

These are valid observations, but a "new and very practical guide to business success" (p. xi)? To support this claim, Gregerman suggested that his clients have reinvented their industries, saved tens of millions of dollars in costs, and identified hundreds of new service ideas in less than two days...by "using these means and others like them" (p. xi). A familiar tune for those of us who have sat through countless dog-and-pony shows staged by "expert consultants." A familiar tune for those of us who have staged such dog-and-pony shows for our own clients.

Naturally the book, being a "practical guide," does not overlook the worth of providing a way to measure just how creative and fun your organization is. After all, numbers don't lie, right? Gregerman is indeed in touch with the business folk's preoccupation with anything resembling a so-called "scientific assessment." *Lessons* provides just such an instrument (Appendix, pp.243-245), and the reader can self-score on 21 questions to gauge his or her "Sandbox IQ." Want to find out how childlike you are? Take the test. Of course, most men only need to ask their spouses to find out how childlike they are, but that's another story.

Gregerman does not only impress us with unsubstantiated statistics. To his credit, he reminds the reader how powerful carefully placed quotations from famous people can be. So we learned that Walter Chrysler (founder of Chrysler Motors) once said, "The real secret of success is enthusiasm" (p. 46). Do you really need more proof than that to support Big Lesson # 2? How about Aldous Huxley (p.57) saying, "The secret of genius is to carry the spirit of the child into old age, which means never losing your

enthusiasm." There are quotes from Edwin Land, Mr. Rogers, Red Skelton, Oscar Wilde, and let's not forget Bill Cosby, among others. The reader will find such wonderful quotes splattered (oops, strategically placed) all over the book. If nothing else, *Lessons* is a great source for quotes that we ourselves can use when we speak to our clients!

To make sure the book is an educational read, Gregerman also throws in dictionary definitions of 16 (yes, I counted them) words, down to their parts of speech. So in *Lessons* we learned what the word "questioning" means (p.143), and if you persevere and read the whole book, you might also learn the definition of the word "achieving" (p.225). Wow, I feel as though as I just got my second Ph.D. already!

Lessons, as do most "guru books," tells us only those stories and facts that support its basic premise—that childhood is the key to business success. While Gregerman's description of kid's play does lend some support to the importance of fun, it does not take much to remind the reader that there is much more to being kids than the exemplar of managerial talent. Do we want our businesses to look like our kids' room? Do we want our managers to get into fist fights or throw a tantrum when things don't go their way? Do we want our businesses to not finish one task before they lose interest and embark on something new? Is it "fun" for our managers to pull wings off flies, or perform other such random acts of cruelty? These (and many other) darker sides of childhood are conveniently

swept under the rug in Gregerman's romantic rendition of kids at play. Employing Gregerman's logic, one can conceivably write a book about how not to run a business based on lessons learned from childhood. But then who would buy it? Sensationalism and romance sell books, grim reality does not.

Is *Lessons* without merit? No. To the extent that it provides a lively reminder of the power of an open mind, the energy stirred by enthusiasm and excitement, and the importance of enjoying one's work, the book offers a glimmer of hope that perhaps all is not lost in the machine-metaphor infested world of business. As such, *Lessons* is more a motivation (for lack of a better term) book than its inflated claim as a formula for business success. Motivation itself is a compelling part of management, of course. And, especially for those in leadership positions, *Lessons* may produce that extra sparkle needed to rekindle the entrepreneurial (and intrapreneurial) flame.

Lessons also performs a service to society, through the author's encouragement to the readers to "make a difference in the lives of children in need" (p.241). If nothing else, the book is written with a social conscience, and in this sense, it is a contribution to the otherwise greed-inspired world of business.

Perhaps instead of buying the book, the reader will do better to donate the purchase price (about \$18) to a charity for children.



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