

A Tour Through my Bookshelf: Business books you should know about

By Karen MacKay

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What are your clients reading? What inspires them?

I regularly quote business books in my writings and presentations. The purpose of these quotes is to provide credibility and validity to my own thinking. I want clients to respect the level of research that goes into *creative thought*. At a recent presentation before an important group of partners in a major law firm I asked if any of them were aware of a particular business book (the name is not important in this context). Not one of them had heard of the book, which in this instance is the number one best-selling business book of all time.

Lawyers do so much reading to keep abreast of their substantive practice knowledge, that there is little time for much else. If, however, you aspire to become a 'trusted advisor' to your clients, you had better be aware, at a minimum, of the books that inspire *them*.

I have pulled a few off my shelf. You can read them if you wish, but for the purpose of this article I'm going to assume you don't have time. By the end of this article you'll be familiar with where the things your clients are talking about come from and, perhaps, why clients are

intrigued. None of these books are about managing law firms; they are about people, demographic groups and companies outside your daily reality.

Has a client ever talked about *core values*, *about being a visionary company* or about becoming a company that is *built to last*. Those ideas came from a book entitled ***Built to Last*** by James Collins and Jerry Porras in 1994. The book was the result of study that compared 18 visionary enduring great companies with 18 companies that were not as successful in their respective industries. Some examples are GE vs. Westinghouse, IBM vs. Burroughs and Citicorp vs. Chase Manhattan. Bill Meehan, a partner at McKinsey and friend of the authors commended them on their work but said the book left out how good companies can become great companies. That led to a study resulting in the next book I pulled off my shelf.

With 20 people and 15000 hours, Jim Collins (same guy) embarked on a journey to determine how good companies became great companies. This is particularly poignant for law firms. Why? Because many law firms I work with are very good, but the good gets in the way of the



great. I have living breathing examples every day of lawyers who will not achieve greatness simply because they don't want to change, don't want to give up their autonomy, or who simply fear failure. Have you heard a client talking about *having the right people on the bus*? Are you involved because your client is *confronting the brutal facts*? Is your client trying to implement a *culture of discipline*? Chances are a copy of **Good to Great** is on the shelf of every member of your client's management team. Anecdotally, I heard the other day that indeed this is the best selling business book of all time.

Against that backdrop, how do great companies and indeed some great professional service firms measure results and provide effective feedback. In 1996 Robert Kaplan, a professor at the Harvard Business School and David Norton a business leader and author for the Harvard Business review, wrote **The Balanced Scorecard**. A recent study by the Hackett Group found that 96% of the nearly 2,000 companies they studied were using The Balanced Scorecard.¹ Your clients, the business leaders who are charged with defining and executing the strategy for their organizations are able to translate strategy into operational terms: financial, customer, learning and growth and, internal business processes utilizing the Balanced Scorecard. If you are truly going to be a trusted advisor, you need to understand this

¹ Harvard Business School Publishing *Balanced Scorecard Report* May-June, 2005

concept. Remember, your clients don't have legal problems - they have business problems that have legal aspects. If you don't understand the business problems and how they are measured you may become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Law firms don't cope well with change. Law – Common Law, is precedent driven in that the past guides the future. If you want to understand how things are changing here are few titles that you might find interesting. Go to the book shop, order a coffee and browse through these titles. I have them all, have read them all and am fascinated by both the research and the thinking in all of them. **The Rise of the Creative Class**, by Richard Florida, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania explores the impact of creative types – actors, writers and yes, lawyers have on economies. **Re-imagine: Business Excellence in a Disruptive Age**, by Tom Peters – same guy who wrote *In Search of Excellence* in 1983 – yes, babies born that year will be articling in your firm next year. In this book Tom rants and raves about new business, new markets and new people. He puts what was then and what is now in easily understandable frameworks and, it is a very fun read. I read this book on an airplane on the way to visit a law firm client. By the time I arrived had used a full deck of Post-it Notes marking things relevant to the pending discussion. The partners in the room were both intrigued and fascinated. Finally, on the topic of all things



changing, *Blink* and *The Tipping Point* both by Malcolm Gladwell. Malcolm is Canadian who lives in Manhattan and who writes for both the Washington Post and The New Yorker magazine. Malcolm's work codifies the things we do in our every day lives that may seem obvious when you are done the read, but to us mere mortals – we don't seem obvious at all until Malcolm clarifies them for us.

The final two books on today's tour are about communication: the first about speaking and the second about writing – the first, a new book, the second, originally published in 1976. Lawyers born in 1976 will be 30 next year.

The first, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* is by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen of The Harvard Negotiation Project. The law firm leaders that I am privileged to serve share a common problem. They have conversations with partners, associates, managers and staff and they are frustrated when it is obvious that the participants in the conversation leave the room with vastly different perspectives on what was said. This book explores the three parts of these difficult conversations, the “what happened” component, the “feelings” component and the “identity” component and provides strategies for improving your effectiveness.

The second, *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser was recommended to me only recently

and I devoured it. This “Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction” will help you with all written business communication – not legal drafting – the stuff that your clients and your people need to read everyday.

As I said, none of these books are about practicing law or running your firm – my friends and colleagues have written the best books in that category. These books are about the world outside your office – that world in which you live and in which your clients compete. Many of these are available on CD so you can listen to them in the car or while on your run. My challenge to you is this – get outside your most pressing matter, your office and your firm and check out the world where your clients are – you'll be refreshed and you'll enjoy it. Have fun.

PS – one more – *Elizabeth I, CEO: Strategic Lessons From the Leader who Built an Empire* by Alan Alexrod uses history as a backdrop for many lessons on leadership. Elizabeth I inherited a business (England) that was in trouble. This is a turnaround story like no other and a great read.

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