

Six books that impacted my view What I learnt from them

1. Adventures of a Bystander by Peter Drucker

This book is Drucker's memoirs of his childhood spent in Vienna of the 1920s amongst intellectuals. As a child he debated the pros and cons of the Freudian theories with the smartest people of that era. When Drucker was 14, he was given the honor of carrying the socialist flag. Halfway through the march, Drucker realized as a young 14-year-old that he was not cut out to be the leader of the parade but was more suited to watch and report on the parade as a bystander and hence the title of the book. He was then a learner – teacher for life. This is a lesson I learnt from all of Drucker's books, his ability to synthesize and offer a teachable point of view. Some of his concepts like the concept of a profit center, MBOs (management by objectives) and span of control have all stood the test of time as concepts. I corresponded with Drucker as a young management trainee in the late 80s and was amazed at his ability to respond to so many of my queries. I learnt to be a lifelong learner, I learnt to step back from an issue to look at it with fresh eyes and I learnt that a leader has to be a good teacher.

2. Managing by Hal Geneen:

Hal Geneen was the President and CEO of ITT from 1950 to 1977. ITT grew from a \$765 million in revenue at the start of his tenure to about \$17 billion through about 350 acquisitions. ITT was regarded as the model conglomerate and multinational. Geneen managed by centralizing finance and strategy and decentralizing operations. Geneen had a wonderful line in this book "management must manage". He said this in the context of Unions and I always remembered that in all my dealings with Unions I worked with. I learnt a lot from the Union leader Mr. K Govindarajan in HLL, Chennai. ITT as a company unraveled after Geneen and a lot of the companies were sold off. The lesson for me was about doing what the company is good at and not chasing unrelated opportunities. In the end sticking to the core works. ITT was also caught doing wrong in Chile and the debate on the role of an MNC in foreign country was a valuable lesson I learnt. An MNC must work for the best interests of the country they operate in.

3. Father, Son and Company by Thomas Watson Jr

IBM was and is one of the most respected companies. This book is about two men – father and son who ran the company for 60 years and were instrumental in instilling the fundamentals of excellence. I learnt the need to excel at something as a business from this book. I also learnt the relentless focus on serving customers from the book. Watson Jr abolished hourly wages and instituted tuition fees for employees. I learnt the need for continuous training in a company from this book. The book also taught me that one can disagree with someone who you love for the sake of the company. These two men loved each other but fought bitterly over the direction the company should take.

4. In Retrospect by Robert Mc Namara

Mc Namara was one of my role models – a thorough professional and one of the few professionals who worked in private enterprise, for the government and for a no profit body. In this book, he accepts that Vietnam was a mistake. He opines that the best people do not challenge the assumptions they make. This is a lesson I have tried to apply – the need to challenge holy cows and assumptions. I have also seen that wrong assumptions hurt many of the companies I worked in - HLL, Nokia, PepsiCo. I also learnt about his loyalty to Kennedy for backing him during the toughest times. So, if a subordinate has done what's right for the company, then I have always stood by the person. McNamara biggest impact was his professionalism- he was the best prepared person in every meeting and he was diligent about reading every paper sent to him before a meeting. These were things I tried to practice every day.

5. Control Your destiny or someone else will by Jack welch

Jack welch has possibly had the most profound impact on managerial thinking. Till Welch came along, academics and professors developed concepts for CEOs to follow. Jack welch turned that upside down and was the first CEO to develop fresh thinking on many management issues. He introduced boundarylessness, speed, forced ranking etc. he also introduced the concept of values and performance linkage. I don't agree with his bottom box slicing every year, however I agreed with his Type A, Type B managers in an organization. Welch was a passionate teacher to his managers and dedicated time and effort to developing people. This is something I tried to emulate as a leader. The other lesson from the book is the concept of tough luv, being tough on performance but caring on other aspects. Welch was also instrumental in raising the quality bar with the adoption of six sigma.

6. Steve Jobs by Walter Issacson

Steve Jobs redefined six industries. Steve Jobs invited Issacson to write this autobiography and Issacson had full access to everyone who worked with Apple and also people who had worked with Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs is the type of person you admire from the outside but not someone whose style you want to emulate or copy. He was horrible with his people, calling them names, abusing them etc. but always demanding the very best from them. Steve Jobs is a paradox, none of his people enjoyed working for him but all his people are deeply loyal because he made them excel and do things they thought was impossible. I certainly didn't subscribe to his theory of consumers don't know what they want and hence market research is a waste of time. This is true in some cases, specifically in some technology products but not in most industries.