



Book Review : Zilch: The Power of Zero in Business

The Reviewers

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The power of zero should appeal to all. And, if you are an Indian, the appeal gets enhanced further by the knowledge that this country is acknowledged to have given the world this important concept and its various mathematical applications. So, pardon me if you discern a certain "pride" in this review – now you know what to attribute it to!

Nancy Lublin fits the "been-there-done-that" framework of authors who bring in the perspectives from their vast experience. The added advantage this book offers is that Lublin's first-hand accounts are complemented by her interviews with leading not-for-profits and successful leaders of such organizations, conducted especially for this work. The CEO of DoSomething.org and the former founder and CEO of Dress for Success, Lublin's contribution to academics also need mention here – she's an adjunct faculty member at New York University and Yale School of Management.

This book is, at once, simple and effective – simple in its chapter texts' straight-from-the-heart "talking-to-the-reader" style and effective (highly, I may add) in its end-of-chapter self-tests. There might be the danger of the seriousness of the message getting lost in the simplicity, with no fancy models or figures or tables to "embellish" the work.

My task as a reviewer would normally have comprised paraphrasing the chapter points. However, here I wish to deviate from this "norm". The reason is symptomatic of this book – simple! The chapter titles are the best summaries themselves! So, I will not take away anything from that charm. This book teaches you to: Do more with less cash to throw at people. Do more with your brand. Do more with your external people. Do more by asking smart. Do more for customers. Do more with your board. Do more with your staff. Do more with your story. Do more with your finances. Do more by bartering with zero. Do more with innovation. Apart from these lessons, there is a concluding chapter whose elegance needs to be highlighted here. This chapter is in the form of an open letter to the "CEO of unnamed ginormous company" (p. 233) – an organization that we, readers, ought to be grateful to!

After all, it was a chance meeting in this company that gave Nancy Lublin her epiphany and us, this book. A "harking back to the beginning" is in order here. The book is arranged into 13 chapters of which two (the "Introduction" and "Conclusion") are unnumbered. So, we have 11 passionate pleas (the "Do more ..." chapters listed above), each with "11 questions to get you started" self-tests. But, Lublin begins her journey with the description of her experience in the meeting room of a "ginormous global conglomerate" (p. 1) along

with seven of the company's top strategic planners who were faced with the prospects of launching a new campaign in light of a recent development – slashing of the media budget. Lublin's disdain for people flaunting luxuries is tellingly brought about in her descriptions of opulence around her in that room. "... a big, beautiful table made of incredible wood no doubt harvested from some disappearing rain forest" (p. 1). "The top exec in the room – who was wearing a pair of handcrafted leather shoes so incredibly lovely that the left shoe alone could have been sold on eBay and fed a family of six in Rwanda for a year –..." (p. 2). Now, the reader may take either of two positions – faced as you are with such strong emotions right at the beginning of the work: you may choose to dismiss Lublin as an unsporting loser in this dog-eat-dog corporate world; or, you may choose to heed the purpose of this book and empathize with the rationale of Lublin's "do-more-with-less" philosophy. She walks the talk and thus is unforgiving of matters of obvious cost impropriety. The "Introduction" brings forth the stark contrast in the approaches of for-profit and not-for-profit business leaders. Lublin is clear about what the book is not – "This is not going to be a lecture about how corporations should contribute more to society. [...] It is not a spiritual tome about finding yourself or generating good karma – I want you to read with a highlighter in hand, not a candle" (p. 3). Lublin's seemingly had it up to her gills having to listen to advices about how not-for-profits need to behave more like businesses. She is not complaining, though. But, the recent economic downturn has given her the right opportunity to give it back to the for-profits (that she cheekily calls nonprofits, p. 4), given that many corporate giants had collapsed. The lessons she distills are elegantly powerful in their simplicity and simply powerful in their elegance! Her caveat to the work is as blunt as blunt can be – "... some not-for-profits are lousy. Of course they are. And some not-for-profit leaders are tired lame ducks. Obviously" (p. 5). She has no regard for such kind and concentrates on distilling learnings from successful not-for-profits and great not-for-profit leaders.

Never in the entire book does Lublin waver from her main purpose – educating the for-profit, corporate world about achieving more with less. Chapter 10 (or, rather, lesson 10) on the virtues of bartering has her in her elements while developing the self-tests. For instance, question (8) poses it as straight as it can get – "Is there something that your target consumer needs – an item, an emotion, an itch scratched – that someone else is filling? Can you strike a relationship with them?" (p. 212). The checklist ends with this one – "Use everything. What can you get in exchange for this book?" (p. 212).

Chief Passion Officer (p. 144) – now, that's one title I wish to see being adopted in this age of fancy CXO titles. The author's passionate plea to "do more with your staff" has this effective advice to the corporate world – hire leaders who are chief passion officers.

After giving detailed explanations and checklists for each of the "Do mores" listed above, Lublin extols the corporate leaders, in her concluding "open letter" to: "Quit your job and go work for a not-for-profit" (p. 234). "Volunteer with a great not-for-profit" (p. 235). "Hire someone from a not-for-profit" (p. 235). Here is one book that should appeal to a wide audience. Normally, I would balk at the thought of "something-for-everyone" approach. But, in this instance, I would rather turn a crusader! If there is one hand that has gone up in support of this book to be on every executive's must-read section, then this reviewer's hand it is!

I suggest you do read the acknowledgement right at the very end. The effusiveness of Lublin's gratitude is reflected in its opening sentences: "People I need to thank. And then thank again. And again. And maybe even one more time" (p. 237). Do not we wish our names could figure in such a list?!