

THE CORNER OFFICE by Adam Bryant

Reviewed by Victoria Barclay, CFA

As a devotee of the column *The Corner Office* in *The New York Times*, I was thrilled to discover that Adam Bryant has released a book based on his weekly feature.

I was expecting a “best-of” compilation or a selection of his “most memorable interviews” with the CEOs of various American companies. That would have been sufficiently interesting, since the profiles give insight into how each individual got to the corner office and what spurs him or her onward. In fact, I was looking forward to re-reading a couple of favourite interviews.

Instead, Bryant has completely reworked the material. From a diverse array of 74 CEOs of public and private companies, ranging from Accenture to Zynga (with a few educational, artistic, and charitable organizations thrown in), he has distilled their collective wisdom.

The reassembly is done on three main scaffoldings: succeeding, managing, and leading. And from each one hangs several pennants, or in some cases, blood-stained shirts from those who’ve gone before. For example, the first rung is not just how to succeed, but also how it felt to succeed (for the first, really big time), how success feels now, how to continue succeeding, and how to encourage others to succeed.

Bryant claims there are five qualities shared by the 74 interviewees: passionate curiosity, battle-hardened confidence, team smarts, a simple mindset, and fearlessness. He goes on to describe several facets of each quality through direct reference to the leaders themselves.

I strongly recommend the book to those looking for advice. No matter what issue currently bedevils you, be it time management or holding productive meetings, you will find a fresh presentation. Possibly it will be new and unexpected advice, probably it will be “classic” advice, but it is guaranteed to be tried and tested advice from a bona fide leader, very often summed up in the CEO veteran’s own words. For example, you

should periodically ask yourself if you are doing “action” or just “activity” (Dan Novak, Yum Brands). Or, if you are stuck for a good meeting icebreaker, why not ask everyone to share a random “fun fact” (Tony Hsieh, Zappos).

The chapter “Smart interviewing” contains a panoply of questions CEOs have, at one time or another, used to

select their best people. Be prepared for some unusual questions. “I ask guys ... if they’ve ever been in anyone’s wedding party” to see if they build strong relationships (Meridee Moore, Watershed Asset Management). Another stumper is: Are you a Tigger or an Eeyore? (Mindy Grossman, HSN).

Even for those who are not specifically looking for advice, the book won’t disappoint. Check out the chapter titled “The surprises that await you.” There’s an amusing story on the degree of scrutiny — extending even to scarf-tying (Linda

Hudson, BAE Systems). There’s also a sobering story on mission in the chapter “Creating a culture” (Kip Tindell, The Container Store).

In lesser hands, such a “sampled remix” of 74 interviews could have become a crazy quilt, but Bryant keeps the themes unified and the samplings short. The index is a tremendous aid, especially if you want to reconstitute the profile of a certain company or CEO. For example, the newly deposed Carol Bartz (Yahoo) appears on five separate occasions: literal snake-killing (a.k.a. resourcefulness), the career pyramid (not “career ladder”), learning from a bad boss (often learning more than from a good boss), asking for genuine feedback, and providing immediate feedback (like house-training a puppy). In light of her public sacking, I wondered how many of the Yahoo board of directors had read Bartz’s eminently colourful quotes.

It is an individual, warts and all, who occupies the corner office. That person has some mixture of the five traits Bryant identified. Like Bartz, their time as CEO may soon be over. Bryant’s column collects the individual’s experience, and this book builds on that by integrating their collective wisdom.

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