

Books for Business Book Review

By Philip Abelard

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Businesses often seem more concerned with the spin than with the reality, more concerned with what people think about the product than the product itself. Employees are constantly being told to be positive. "Negative attitude" on an evaluation can kill a career. Positive thinking shaman crisscross the country, delivering keynotes and writing books. With cosmetically perfect smiles and televangelist hair, they explain that everything is, after all, wonderful. Let's all think happy thoughts. And the glass is--as we all know--half full not half empty.

Reading the cover of Barry Maher's new book, "Filling the Glass: The Skeptic's Guide to Positive Thinking in Business," you might expect more of the same. Maher is, after all, a prominent keynote speaker. And the cover blurbs are too good: "inspiring," "uplifting," "packed with useful practical advice," "enlightening," "entertaining," even "laugh out loud funny." Once you begin the book however, you'll suspect that Maher's teeth are less than perfect. He openly admits his hair is much too thin for televangelism. He says things like "With all the money we spend on self improvement in this country, you'd think we'd all be darn close to perfect by now." And, "If you're absolutely, 100 percent positive, without the slightest trace of a doubt that you can do something, get a second opinion."

"Filling the Glass" is a business self-help book with an edge: Chicken Soup for the Skeptical Soul. It's a book for the rest of us--for those who understand the benefits of a positive attitude but deep down inside don't really believe that chanting affirmations will make our dreams come true. It's a book for those who suspect that when the boss enthuses, "Jack has a positive attitude," he really means, "Jack kisses all the right posteriors and doesn't gripe about my stupidity."

Barry Maher doesn't seem at all concerned about who moved his cheese. He distrusts self-help books and business gurus. And when he holds them up to question, he holds himself up as well. Readers who loved "Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun," Maher writes, will find that Maher is "every bit as much an expert on seat-of-the-pants psychology as Attila was on rape, pillage and--I guess--twentieth century management technique."

To Maher, whether you call the glass half empty or half full, it's still only four ounces of water. The problem isn't whether it's half full or half empty, the problem is figuring out how to fill it up. Reality

counts. To grow or change or improve a business, to motivate people for the long haul, you have to begin by dealing with that reality--rather than what you, the company, the CEO or the stockholders might wish were true. All the innovative--and even counter-intuitive--strategies, tactics and tips that Maher offers for improving businesses, business lives, and careers spring from that deceptively simple premise.

Consider the technique he calls, Bragging about the Negatives. Are you having a problem explaining a price increase, for example? Try this: "Are our rates expensive? Absolutely. Why do we charge so much? Because we can. Because our clients are willing to pay that much for the results we generate. Is the competition cheaper? Absolutely. But do you really think they would charge less if they could charge more? They charge less because that's what they can get for the results they generate." No excuses, no convoluted explanations, no mealy-mouthing. Reality.

If you ever want to promote an idea, a proposal or yourself, if you ever want to sell anything to anybody, the story of Clyde Thompson winning a job by bragging about his prison record is, by itself, worth the price of the book.

Maher's unique perspective illuminates even the familiar in new and revealing ways. "As far as this, I'm okay, you're okay stuff," he writes, "maybe you're not so okay. It's not like everybody is. The universe has produced Charles Manson, Jeffrey Dahmer and Adolf Hitler. They weren't okay. And to be frank, I'm still not all that convinced about Attila the Hun . . . [When it comes to self esteem,] you know yourself a lot better than I do. If you don't think much of yourself, who am I to contradict you?" Oddly enough, the book's hardheaded skepticism ultimately makes it more inspirational--and more positive--not less. The ending is an emotional body blow.

"Filling the Glass" is not perfect. Some strategies could use more amplification: two or three are worthy of books of their own. A few anecdotes seem to have been included more for their entertainment value than because they add much to the message. And occasionally, "Filling the Glass" yields to the self help temptation of promising more than it or any book or program can deliver. The over-promising is unnecessary, and Maher should know better. But, as he himself notes, "Marketing has it's own truths which are often hidden from the heart."

No matter, "Filling the Glass: The Skeptic's Guide to Positive Thinking in Business" is a strong \$\$\$\$\$: our highest recommendation. For once, the cover blurbs are right. And when "Guerrilla Marketing" author Jay Levinson writes that "Filling the Glass" should be "required reading for any MBA program," the proper response, even for those of us without televangelist hair, can only be "Amen."

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