The risky business of consulting

If business success or failure is a corporate battlefield then Don Matlock as an old soldier consultant has some interesting battlefield stories. PETER PONTIKIS SF Fin reviews his new book.


This handbook-sized text by Don Matlock is a personal introduction to the world of consulting from both a business and personal point of view. It is one man’s collection of the better part of five decades of experience in the consulting game.

As one who has traversed (albeit for a shorter while) the challenge of consulting, much of what Matlock writes rings as familiar, with the added dimension of being from another person’s perspective and industry. The book is not, however, ‘old news’, but a linear compendium of lessons and wisdom that is good for those who are thinking of starting out or who are well into their own business.

Full of anecdotes, it is an enjoyable read that, although a manual of consulting procedures, does not feel like one. Easily digestible, one can re-dip into the book to refresh the points that Matlock tries well and generously to provide us with.

For those new to the consulting game (or indeed for the vast majority of us who are paid full-time employees), it is a valuable reference resource. What it lacks in straight academic structure, it more than makes up for in its appeal to the emotional intelligence and challenge of ‘going out on your own’.

The book does not dwell in the world of theory, but in stating what works and what does not, it implicitly saves us time and gives us wise counsel. Robust chapters on business plans, marketing and sales and negotiations are presented in a way that assumes they will be executed by human beings. In doing so it gives the reader an eyes-wide-open vision of what lies ahead in the consulting field.

Without necessarily stating it, it is a starter for entrepreneurship: a field sadly under-provided for in an otherwise cluttered space full of the hagiographies of CEOs and managers rather than fundamental handbooks for the road to that elusive concept — success, a definition of which Matlock attempts to provide in his own accessible way.

He states that for all the analysis one can put into a business plan and a new venture, at the end of the day it is about people, and deals with, people. Psychology and the emotional intelligence needed in consulting cannot be overlooked. Indeed he argues it should be embraced. He backs this up with a discrete chapter on health and fitness.

His extensive recollection of personal businesses experiences pepper the book throughout. Normally the risk of such a personalised account of the consulting game would fall into the trap of idiosyncrasy. This is something that this book avoids, retaining a certain universality of application. For while there are many lessons in each chapter, there is a point to them. The anecdotes in each chapter are applied and for a purpose. Each chapter has at the end of it a distilled bullet point summary of key takeaways that form the skeleton of the passages just read, making the information retrievable at many levels and directions.

The book is full of personal anecdotes and sometimes (as the author later apologises) verges on a recitation of the good ‘old days’ of the Australian business world of 1970s and 80s. At risk of sounding nostalgic, there is an element of social documentation in these, which while not set squarely in the heart of literary trends has, I feel, a place for those interested in business practices of the second half of the 20th century.

The book has a handy series of appendices and letter templates for the budding consultant at the back of the book. Though some of them initially appear to be in ‘pre-Microsoft Outlook’ form, they still are useful and offer the framework for structuring procedures and procedures that we should all have in business without necessarily turning us into cost accountants.

In summary the book is an excellent reference point for those already in or considering the consulting game. Beyond that, it also serves to broaden the horizons of career expectations for those of us who are too busy working in the business and not on the business. A text worth considering.

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