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EXECUTIVE PURSUITS

Executive Pursuits: In search of a good business book

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"When was the last time you read a really great book?"

A reasonable and engaging question, I think, and one for which the answer is different for everyone. I am a reader, always have been, and I usually can get through three to four books a month, with a mix of fiction, biography, travel, and a special soft spot for short stories and essays. Ron Chernow's biography of Ulysses S. Grant, "Grant," is last year's favorite. For 2018, my pick is Anthony Ray Hinton's "The Sun Does Shine," the most infuriating and essential book you should read this year.

Recently, I've turned my attention to business books, which by and large are a mixed bag. For my active transactional practice, I read plenty of books and articles about term sheets, M&A agreements and negotiating. Some are worth the time, others not so much, and the paperback business bestsellers at airport kiosks often are among the worst. To my mind, the best business books are those that tell you something relevant and new or help you think about a challenge that is old and difficult. They also ought to include lots of "takeaways" or action items, something that you can implement today, next week or next quarter.

A few recent reads fit the bill. In "The New U: Faster & Cheaper Alternatives to College," Ryan Craig of University Ventures covers the growing gap between college and actual employer needs and the collective mountain of overall student debt in the U.S. The statistics around student debt and college-completion rates will resonate with many parents of high school students, as will the innovative "last mile programs" that Craig describes in the book. Should local tech and life sciences companies be thinking about intensive boot camps and real-work training for future employees, whether they are degreed or not? For 2018 and beyond, is the job — rather than the degree — the most important credential?

I also enjoyed two other recent business books that shift the focus from employees to "you" — and your style and effectiveness as a manager, mentor and colleague. Nigel Travis, chair of Dunkin' Brands Group Inc. and author of "The Challenge Culture," has written an engaging history of his storied corporate career, from Blockbuster (yes, they passed on the Netflix acquisition) to Dunkin' — and he tells why creating a culture of listening, challenge and curiosity is fundamental for businesses and professional relationships.

Another local author, Carol Fulp, CEO of The Partnership, agrees. In her insightful book, "Success Through Diversity," she lays out direct and commonsense steps managers can take to ensure that the way they think inside the company reflects the greater customer world outside.

Both books are effective because the authors come across as direct and authentic. I love Travis's simple advice: "Question everything; trash no one." Ditto for Fulp's clear-eyed observation that many diversity programs amount to mere virtue signaling without effecting real change. You need to want diverse perspectives, she says, not just different people.

The best books open our minds and challenge our assumptions. That makes reading a worthy and recommended pursuit for any executive.

Larry Gennari is a lawyer and chief curator for Authors & Innovators, an annual business book and ideas festival.



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