

Fresh perspectives for your practice

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AT THIS time of year, many of us who don't usually have the time or inclination to digest a good book will opt for light reading by the pool. But some of us might look for something weightier to stimulate new thinking. Here are a few suggestions:

- The Starfish and the Spider by Brahm Albers and Robert Beckstrom describes the fascinating emergence and "unstoppable power" of "leaderless organisations". Gone, they say, are the days of hierarchical, top-down central command-and-control, as modern business is increasingly shaped by decentralised communities of peers, characterised by the likes of Wikipedia, Skype and e-Bay.
- The shift to people-centred organisations is the theme of Meaning Inc, by Bains and others, which provides a substantial, empirically based analysis of the state of business organisations and what employees and leaders really think about their work. At a time when research apparently shows that significant numbers of lawyers are not happy with their jobs, this book focuses on the proposition that the future of successful organisations lies in providing their employees with meaning at work. This requires a real sense of purpose, strong values, innovative benefits, concern for the wider societal and environmental impact of business and empowering leadership. Examples of successful "Meaning Inc" companies include Starbucks, Goldman Sachs, Tesco and RBS.
- Freakonomics by Levitt and Dubner challenges us to assess data honestly and to look afresh at risk and our reaction to it. It forces us to reconsider how we respond, for example, to the risk of terrorist attacks where the outrage factor is high but the hazard low. Contrast that with our approach to heart disease where the converse is true. For lawyers, the emphasis on asking the right questions and casting doubt on traditional approaches to risk assessment is thought-provoking. Often ideas and theories to which we adhere as conventional wisdom are just wrong.
- This theme will be familiar to followers of the lateral thinker Edward de Bono, whose forthcoming appearance at the Edinburgh Book Festival in August sold out quickly. Try his Why So Stupid? for a commentary on how the human race has never learned to think. His critical appraisal of argument as a "crude and primitive method of thinking" is startling, and he contends that "case making" in the law is downright inefficient. He cites with approval the verdict of "not proven" as a valuable recognition that things are not always capable of being boxed as "true", "untrue", "right" or "wrong".
- Challenging the notion of mere "right" and "wrong", and for those of us whose interests lie in conflict and its resolution, Kenneth Cloke has written a masterful book, Mediating Dangerously. Cloke explores the nature and source of conflicts, the deep sense of self which is represented in many conflicts, and the difficulties we all face in listening, speaking coherently or reaching a common understanding when we feel we are being attacked. "Everyone in conflict has a different perception of what happened, who caused it, and why. Each side tells stories that are accurate and honest - for themselves... and that are inaccurate and dishonest - for each other." Cloke invites mediators and others engaged in resolving conflict to understand not only those with whom they work but themselves.

- Understanding ourselves might help those of us who play sport. I am always on the lookout for books from which parallels can be drawn for other areas of life. Golf is not a Game of Perfect is a great example: here, Dr Bob Rotella, coach to top professionals, describes how golfers need to understand the power within themselves, drawing on inner strength to play well under pressure, be consistent and control their destinies. What he teaches has just as much application to a courtroom lawyer or corporate deal maker as it has to his golfing audience.

Happy reading!