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Zilch: The Power of Zero in Business by Nancy Lublin
(Penguin Group (USA), Inc., ----- 2010)

Have you ever picked up a book really expecting to totally love it? Then have you ever been just slightly less enthusiastic when you finished it? Please don't get me wrong here, this book is very good; it is just not quite as perfect as one might like.

So let us establish two things up front. One, this book, *Zilch: The Power of Zero in Business*, is written for the *for-profit* world based on her success in the *not-for-profit* world. Two, when you talk about someone as successful as Ms. Lublin, you walk a fine line. Speak too positively about the book and you are *sucking up*. Speak too negatively and you are bashing. We'll try to walk that tightrope in between.

There are 11 chapters in the book, each ending with *Eleven questions to get you started*. These summarize the chapter and enumerate a game plan to follow for implementation of the ideas presented. A great tool.

An interesting and curious point near the beginning of the book is the amazing level of social commitment, charity, and pro bono work performed in this country by its citizens/employees. This is one of those things that sets us apart from many nations. We do give. Yet Ms. Lublin makes the point that too many firms do not acknowledge the value of this to their own employees as well as the firm itself. Where are our real values?

Most of her recommendations are very practical and attempt to cut through the typical hype of the *answer* genre. And the vast majority of her recommendations are right to the point. Many people in the corporate world can learn a great deal from reading this book, applying the suggestions and changing their cultures accordingly. However, there is one particular point she makes that must be challenged. On page 45 where she is talking about creating a written set of guidelines then says, "Please don't call it a mission statement. Those corny, vacuous statements might look pretty . . . , but they invite your employees to snicker because those empty words were never truly adopted and never truly meant."

Unfortunately, Ms. Lublin does not expand on what she means here, but it seems clear, she has no respect for the mission statement. Perhaps her experience is the basis for this position. However, the power of a well written, and inculcated, mission statement has been the basis of many successful firms. Take Sony Corporation as an example. It is the early 1950s and *made in Japan* was equated with cheap, poor quality, disposable goods. Their mission statement was, "Become the company most known for

changing the worldwide poor-quality image of Japanese products.” Do you think they have accomplished their mission?

This type of mission statement can, and does, motivate employees to perform exceptionally in companies (both for-profit and not-for-profit) that have the right kind of culture. The culture is the problem with many firms; not the mission statement. The author actually does refer to changing (improving) the culture many times in the book in varying ways. This is a legitimate point to make in her book; and critical to the success of many firms beyond the ordinary. The particular blanket statement she makes tainted an otherwise excellent book. If she had only tempered her words with, “in many cases . . .” her point would have been more on point.

Interestingly, in the second chapter she begins to build her case on branding, which she feels is extremely important. Absolutely agree. That is how every firm can truly separate itself from the marketplace in their customers’ minds. She likens branding to a core purpose. What some might call a mission statement. Ms. Lublin goes onto to explore how knowing your customer in order to develop your brand is critical. This way you know their expectations and demands. One excellent point we can all take to heart is the ability to craft and deliver an emotionally connecting 15-second description of who we are and what value we bring.

We all have multiple stakeholders; those whom have a vested interest in our success. This book makes a point of reminding us to leverage these connections. When we win; they win. Ms. Lublin also does not let us forget some of the old maxims:

- Set and stick to use deadlines
- Quantify goals
- Make our service or product cool
- Build relationships
- Don’t burn bridges

Political candidates remind us near the end of each campaign to vote for them to so that we can be a part of a winner. We all want to be winners and associate with them. When our firm broadcasts it is a winner; when our stakeholders promote our winning ways, people want to be linked with us.

A very interesting point made by Ms. Lublin is to *be important rather than nice*, and to do so through a vision. The vision of a dynamic CEO is critical. The CEO leads the firm down the path to success via this vision. Yet she feels the CEO should *not* be a member of the Board of Directors, (BoD). This is a very unusual viewpoint. Usually the CEO is a critical bridge between the BoD and the senior management team implementing the firm’s strategy and therefore is automatically included on the BoD. The author feels this is a conflict of interest and the BoD should have the ability to discuss the CEO’s performance anytime without the CEO’s uncomfortable presence.



On *be important rather than nice*, she states that *nice* (firms, causes, and people) can be avoided, but *important* must be addressed. When a firm is important people pay attention and respond more so than when we are just nice. We need to make the world realize how important we really are.

Would you say experience and expertise is overrated? This book takes that position. The author prefers passion to experience. Many people really want a doctor with passion. However, most would say they would go to an experienced, less passionate one when something was really wrong with them. Where passion is invaluable is in storytelling. Storytelling of our firm's history, vision and uniqueness is one way to connect with our customers. People love stories so tell them and be visual.

In the later chapters there are a couple of places where unnecessarily snide comments were inserted, such as on page 171 when the author refers to, *artificially enhanced celebrities* endorsing products. This adds nothing of value to the overall argument and seems completely unnecessary and out of place.

A relatively weak portion of the book is Chapter 9, which focuses on financing. There is a questionable explanation of overhead and the lack of including what we do, use or provide in the overhead. A better presentation of the basic principles of finance, such as operational budgeting, managerial accounting and waste measurement and reduction can be found in a variety of corporate finance textbooks by Ross-Westerfield-Jordan or Brealey-Myers, among others.

The book does finish strong with a chapter on innovation. Here we circle back to culture to tie things properly together. Innovation is looking to do better. Many firms are not innovative at all, due in part, to their fear of punishment for failure. At the very least lack of rewards for even trying stifles innovation in many others. For innovation to work consistently, it must be a part of the corporate culture. Look at all of the products 3M has developed over the years. Innovation is in their culture and their mission statement.

A recurring theme that is a basis of the book is think big, talk big, dream big. Reaching for the stars and falling short still equates to some wonderful achievements. This book, despite a few dings in the paint, is a Lexus, when most of us only dream of a Toyota.

Reviewer Daniel Feiman, MBA, CMC, is Visiting Professor, Managing Director of Build It Backwards, whose most recent book is The Book on Improving Productivity by Fair Means or Foul.