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BEST BUSINESS BOOKS 2017: MANAGEMENT

Mind over Matter

BY DUFF MCDONALD

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Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, **Stealing Fire: How Silicon Valley, the Navy SEALs, and Maverick Scientists Are Revolutionizing the Way We Live and Work** (HarperCollins, 2017)

★ A TOP SHELF PICK

Friederike Fabritius and Hans W. Hagemann, **The Leading Brain: Powerful Science-Based Strategies for Achieving Peak Performance** (TarcherPerigee, 2017)

Tasha Eurich, **Insight: Why We're Not as Self-Aware as We Think, and How Seeing Ourselves Clearly Helps Us Succeed at Work and in Life** (Crown Business, 2017)

Each year, scores of management books claim significant new scientific findings in the pursuit of an unchanging goal: how to perform better, both individually and in groups. But most of those so-called findings are neither scientific nor new. The majority of management writers simply offer up freshly tossed word salads in hopes of coining that year's business buzzword.

However, a refreshing wave of insight has flooded into the management space in recent years thanks to neuroscience, the rapidly evolving study of how our brains work and how we might use that knowledge to

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make better decisions, break bad habits, and generally live our best lives.

The clear standout in the category in 2017 is *Stealing Fire: How Silicon Valley, the Navy SEALs, and Maverick Scientists Are Revolutionizing the Way We Live and Work*. Authors Steven Kotler (*The Rise of Superman*; New Harvest, 2014) and Jamie Wheal have gifted us with a thrilling tour through worldwide efforts to better harness flow, which is defined as an optimal state of consciousness where we feel our best and perform our best.

Most books that focus on using neuroscience in order to work better concentrate on improving our understanding and control of our own brains. But *Stealing Fire* shows us how to find peak performance through release rather than effort: We get in the peak performance zone not by finding ourselves but by allowing our sense of self to vanish. The goal is to enter “an elongated present,” which researchers also describe as “the deep now.” This concept has been popularized in various forms: presence, mindfulness, Eckhart Tolle’s “power of now.” Although they go by different names, the majority of altered states, or flow, share four signature characteristics: selflessness, timelessness, effortlessness, and richness (STER), write the authors. (Their Flow Genome Project is an “interdisciplinary, global organization committed to mapping the genome of flow by 2020 and open sourcing it to everyone.”)

It’s clear that the search for and sense of the interconnectedness of all things isn’t just for yoga class; it’s also one of the best ways to make those mental connections that elude the majority of us during the daily grind. Although the authors make the case that we collectively spend US\$4 trillion on the “altered states economy” every year trying to achieve STER, we are very much at the dawn of our understanding of it. Indeed, the Navy SEALs, who are legendary for their ability to shut off the self and merge with the team, go so far as to admit that they don’t know how to train people to do so. The most they can do is weed out those who reveal that they cannot enter the correct state. “If we really understood this phenomenon,” says SEAL commander Rich Davis,



“we could train for it, not screen for it.” But they don’t.

Stealing Fire includes a brilliant discussion of the intersection of self-exploration via non-ordinary states and societal control, with clearly written and highly persuasive chapters on why so many people are afraid of the kinds of things that flow researchers talk about. And we learn that at the highest levels of corporate America, flow is taken very seriously. One of the reasons Eric Schmidt found himself at the head of the pack of candidates to become the CEO of Google was that he was the only one of hundreds of candidates to have attended Burning Man — a festival associated with the search for flow. That impressed cofounders Larry Page and Sergey Brin as much as anything else on all the hundreds of resumes they reviewed, according to the authors.

There’s an extremely wide range of opinions about the benefits — or harms — of drinking Red Bull (full disclosure: This reviewer is a fan, and has written a profile of founder Dietrich Mateschitz). But Kotler and Wheal remind us of a few factors that differentiate the energy drink giant from 99.99 percent of its corporate brethren. In 2013, for example, the company cosponsored the Red Bull Hacking Creativity project with the MIT Media Lab, the largest meta-analysis of creativity

research ever conducted. One of the conclusions was that the reason we find it so difficult to teach creativity is that we confuse it for a skill; in reality, it’s more like a state of mind. The same might be said for Red Bull — it’s less an energy drink company than a champion of a *carpe diem*, YOLO way of living. You know, the approach most likely to lead you to flow.

The ideas that Kotler and Wheal are homing in on and illuminating through their Flow Genome Project are some of the most important ideas in the history of exploring not just the self, but life itself. We might call it different names, but that place where action and awareness merge is the place we should all be aiming for. This is the rare management book that really makes you think. And the questions it raises are not easy ones. If we really can let go of our ego and change the “wallpaper” of our minds, ask the authors, what good are the thoughts we have been telling ourselves? If we are not our thoughts, who are we?

The DNA of Performance

The Leading Brain: Powerful Science-Based Strategies for Achieving Peak Performance is a more traditional entry in the neuroscience-and-work realm. Authors Friederike Fabritius (a neuropsychologist) and Hans W. Hagemann (a leadership consultant) have produced a smartly written examination of our current understanding of the neurochemicals they refer to as the “DNA of peak performance”: dopamine, noradrenaline, and acetylcholine.

Dopamine helps update information in your memory and affects your ability to focus on a given task. A so-called novelty transmitter, it has the strongest effects when the stimulus that generates it is new. Learning is easiest, as we all know, when it is fun. Noradrenaline, whose primary purpose is survival, regulates your attention and alertness. Recent findings show, not surprisingly, that we achieve optimal noradrenaline levels when we are slightly overchallenged.

And acetylcholine ties it all together. Comparing the “DNA” to photography, the authors suggest that noradrenaline prompts you to point your camera in the right direction, dopamine lets you zoom in until the composition is just right, and acetylcholine sharpens the focus. If you get only two of those ingredients right, you’ve got one of the millions of snapshots living in the phones in our pockets. Get all three right, and you’ve got a work of art, or optimal performance.

The authors also remind us of the important point

that we are not all wired the same way, and one person's optimal state of emotional arousal could be another's recipe for a nervous breakdown. The key, say the authors, is to know yourself (via serious self-study) well enough to figure out how to best regulate your emotions and focus your attention on the kinds of tasks you are well suited to. The way to do that is to train your brain by teaching its weaker but more sophisticated conscious regions how to reliably outsmart its stronger but more unconscious parts.

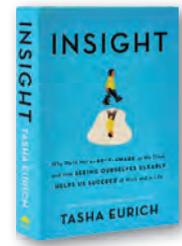
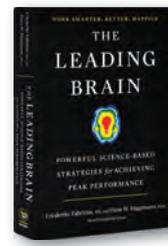
Who among us has not been poorly served by a runaway fight-or-flight response in an unexpectedly uncomfortable moment with our boss? And how can we do better grappling with it in the future? By eating well, sleeping well, remembering to breathe, and exercising regularly. Although that isn't exactly news, neither is the fact that failure on one or more of those four fronts is how most of us usually enter the realm of self-defeating behaviors. Correct for those, and then start using some of the authors'

Train your brain by teaching its weaker but more sophisticated conscious regions how to reliably outsmart its stronger but more unconscious parts.

tricks such as “cognitive reappraisal” to expand the space between stimulus and response and do a better job of operating within it.

That's the elongated present again, the deep now. Maybe one day, we can hold meetings there as well. And why wouldn't we want to? According to a decade-long McKinsey study, productivity increases fivefold when top executives are in flow. Although such a precise statistic kind of misses the point — MBAs and their measuring sticks can help us analyze ourselves to death, but MBAs are not the first people you should call if you want to harness altered states — the fact that it's being studied at all is a good thing.

Of course, it will be difficult to truly find ourselves in flow unless we give up on mass delusions such as multitasking's effectiveness and start to make concerted efforts to reduce, not increase, the digital distractions.



Searching for Insight

Tasha Eurich's *Insight: Why We're Not as Self-Aware as We Think, and How Seeing Ourselves Clearly Helps Us Succeed at Work and in Life* is an earnest if simplified survey of the burgeoning subject of self-awareness. Eurich, an organizational psychologist, researcher, and entrepreneur, is less inclined to hard science than the authors of *Stealing Fire* and *The Leading Brain*, but *Insight* does indeed offer insight into the difficulties of exercising mind over matter. Such as: Self-awareness can be difficult to come by, even for those who write about it professionally. Eurich recounts the time she gave a “closing keynote” at a conference and didn't feel so good about it but it turned out that the audience loved her.

Eurich posits a softer understanding of the impact of mindfulness. She informs us that employees who lack self-awareness reduce “decision quality” by an average of 36 percent, and increase conflicts by 30 percent. (These are tough metrics to quantify.) But Eurich's tendency to use her own experience as proof of the quality of her own ideas shows the dangers of circular self-examination. Although she was first skeptical of the benefits of meditation, she tells us, a one-week retreat at the Shambala Mountain Center allowed her to “*finally* get it.” But then she ceased the practice within days because, as she puts it, “non-meditative techniques just work better for me.”

The benefits of mindfulness and meditation are well documented by now, but the fact is that, as Eurich herself demonstrates, a true increase in self-knowledge is one of those things that you can't force or buy at the gift shop during a spiritual retreat. Don't get me wrong. I'm sure Shambala is a beautiful place, and I'm all in on the benefits of mindfulness and meditation. But you don't have to trek to remote Colorado to enjoy them. If you haven't tried Headspace or the Oprah Winfrey/Deepak Chopra meditation apps, get them. They're both great.

Like anything worthwhile, meditation, mindful-

ness, and insight all take commitment and practice. And the best you can do is prepare yourself — and your brain — to be ready when you really need it, and hopefully your neurotransmitters will do their thing when you need them to. To that end, it cannot hurt to remind yourself of the things you really want from your brain, and Eurich is certainly correct in her suggestion that increased self-awareness should rank high among them. But her contribution to the canon reads less like scholarship than like a spiel from someone who's read the first two books and is telling you how her own life is a reflection of all the learnedness within.

This is an annual best business books survey of works about management science, with the goal of helping you prioritize your reading. And being mindful of your time, I'd like to propose a small twist. Read *Insight* if the concepts of neuroscience and its relationship to management are relatively new to you. Read *Stealing Fire* and *The Leading Brain* to take a deeper dive into the topic. If you're intrigued and seeking even more knowledge, you should also pick up *Your Brain at Work*, *s+b* contributor David Rock's groundbreaking 2009 contribution to the canon. +

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