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Zen and the art of good business

Sydney Morning Herald, March 2, 2004



Sydney, Australia -- Buy Phan and Ter's book now - not because it's flawless (it's not) - but because its Zen Buddhist path to business and management/leadership will be the next big thing for touchy-feely weekends and MBA curricula.

The book could easily have been named "Feng Shui For Your Business", or "Goodbye Western Aggro, Hello Eastern Calm" but neither are as sexy or saleable as dotZEN.

Ironically, while dotZEN is a criticism of Western aggression (and an implied criticism of Sun Tzu's much lauded Art of War), it is a Buddhist version of some Christians' prosperity gospel: believe and grow rich.

The back-cover blurb, by author Ron Kaufman, says Phan "marries global business, Eastern culture and Buddhist philosophy in a diamond text that will open your eyes, ease your mind, and make you lots of money!"

dotZEN is a quirky, endearing, infuriating book that is bursting with refreshing ideas that won't be in Western-based MBA textbooks. For example, how can your product stand out? "The answer is spirit, or soul," Phan and Ter advise. And how do you show you care for your employees? "Rather than provide caffeine for your people," the authors suggest, "opt instead to provide 'chill-out' rooms where stressed employees can relax for 15 minutes or so before getting back on (sic) work again."

The basic structure of each chapter is a traditional Zen koan (an apparently simple thought embodying great wisdom) written in the English alphabet and traditional Chinese characters; an overview; a case study followed by suggestions for action; and finally a "BitZen" meditation.

dotZEN also has a number of annoying non sequiturs that leave the reader struggling to follow Phan and Ter's allegedly Zen conclusions.

The final chapter - on internet survival tips - is the best example. The koan on which the chapter is based is "Don't judge the Buddha through the 32 marks".

Phan and Ter tell the reader that the Diamond Sutra, from which this is taken, is showing us "that what seems to be true may not be and what seems to work may not either".

The authors then offer 25 pages of tips on security, spam, viruses, branding and search engines before finally making the point that "not everything on the internet can be trusted completely".

Their final BitZen, which concludes this chapter and - incidentally - the book, is that "much as we may believe technology to belong to geeks and gurus, it is as accessible, and increasingly more so, to all of us. It simply takes patience, and an open and learning mind".

Er, yes, but isn't this verging on the bleeding obvious?

Don't get me wrong. dotZEN is a useful and important book. Australian bosses would do well to read the first chapter on business, service and quality in which Phan and Ter conclude that "service is not a cosmetic surface but must be deeply rooted and entrenched in the culture of the organisation, or even the nation".

Continuing the emphasis on having the right people serving customers, the authors warn "many corporations neglect people development in the holistic manner, opting for short-term fixes such as motivational talks and training programs".

Feng shui is now a relatively well-known import into Australian thought, alongside life coaching, alternative therapies and various New Age practices but Phan and Ter bring a much wider and deeper perspective to it in relation to business.

They encourage business to be good neighbours and to "learn to be gracious and think of your environment", in contrast to the Western competitive and exploitative view of business and the earth.

They explain the Asian concept where feng shui demands that "for someone to prosper, the neighbours should be taken care of as well".

Both Phan and Ter are Chinese speakers with English as a second language, and this shows in the occasional "Chinglish" sentence which could do with firmer editing.

For example, when Phan illustrates a point about excellent customer service, he writes "both men went out of their paths to make sure I did not buy a dud".

A more thorough editing job would have changed "paths" to "way" - a small but jarring error in a book that is about excellence.

Maybe this is due to the fact that a public relations company, and not a traditional publishing house, has produced the book. The PR company is Singapore-based McGallen & Bolden - of which co-author Ter Hui Peng is associate director.

The book ends awkwardly with suggestions about diet that point to a book that Phan has co-authored with his brother, Ching Jung, who is described as a champion body-builder. Continuing the family connection, CJ (as he's cutely called) has done the line drawings for dotZEN.

Despite these picky criticisms, Phan and Ter have the experience and credentials to give dotZEN some muscle.

Ter has a Masters in Science in Training and Development (Leicester) and Phan has a PhD in business-quality management. He also, according to the book's blurb, has done "cutting-edge patent-pending biotech research in the areas of autoxidation!"

dotZEN - Practical tips and thoughts on Business, Marketing, PR and the Internet from the Diamond Sutra, Dr Seamus Phan and Ter Hui Peng, McGallen & Bolden Group 2003, ISBN 981-04-5645-X, \$US11, 192pp inc index.

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