

Book Reviews #6: In Brief

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Book 1 – What if Common Sense was Common Practice in business?

By Rex Conner, 2014

Introduction

From time to time, books come my way that spark my interest, not because they are about project management, indeed they may not be, but nevertheless because they have a definite application in the project management environment.

Book 1 is about Common Sense. True that the phrase "project management" is not mentioned anywhere, but what could be more relevant to project management generally than that? In this book the author's essential theme is that we are so used to using standard platitudes that we fail to realize that the listeners are free to interpret such fuzzy descriptors any which way they like. Examples include such expressions as customer-centered, teamwork, world-class and so on. Is it any wonder that so many projects fail?

This book introduces the reader to some very common sense practices for use in the workplace – and anywhere else for that matter – with especial regard to communications, such as:¹

- Creating a culture of clear communication in the organization
- Establishing a Common Performance Language™
- Squeezing subjectivity (the root of all workplace evil) out of work processes, and
- Reducing the conflict between the boss and bossed

About the author

Rex Conner says he doesn't want you, the reader, to be distracted or impressed by his degrees and decades of experience in the field of human performance in the workplace. Rather he wants to capture your imagination so you become expert in recognizing and applying common sense opportunities in your situation.² We'll follow his advice.

Book Structure

The structure of this book consists of just two parts, A and B.

Part A has eight chapters covering such topics as *Common Sense: Create a Common Performance Language*; *The Common Enemy is Subjectivity*; *The Common Sense Point is Clarity and Simplicity* and includes descriptions of common sense scenarios. Part A also focuses on identifying and retaining the right people. The point is that if you recruit people to do work described only by fuzzy language, language that they interpret in their own way, then you should not be surprised if their work performance does not meet your expectations.

The author defines "fuzzy communication" as "ANY performance related communication that can be interpreted differently by different people."³ So, included in Part A are a whole series of factual scenarios demonstrating the results of using *fuzzy communications*. Here's one such wonderful example.⁴

A True Story: (We join the scenario during the boss's explanation to a brand new College Career Counselor of what the job 'really is'.)

New Counselor (NC): So, our company only gets paid based on the student attending the college class just one time. After that we don't care?

Manager (M): It's not really that we don't care, but we don't get paid for anything beyond that, so we can't spend more time on them than whatever it takes to get them to that first class so they get their grant check.

NC: So, I'm not really working as a career counselor, which was described in the hiring process. I'm a telemarketer just hounding them to get to class so they can get their first grant check so we can get paid?

M: You might look at it that way, but 'Career Counselor' looks better on your resume than 'Telemarketer'.

NC: So, is my job performance evaluation based on how many people I get to attend class?

M: That's part of it.

NC: What else is there?

M: The main part is how I evaluate you as a team player.

NC: And what basis do you use to evaluate that?

M: Whatever I feel like when it's time to evaluate you.

NC: So, let's see if I have this correct: I was hired as a career counselor, I'm receiving on-the-job-training as a telemarketer, and I will be evaluated on my ability to suck-up to my manager?

M: We aren't going to get along are we?

The author concludes Part A of his book by observing:⁵

"The point of this book is not that you have to adopt the *practices* that are used for examples, it's for you to use the *principles* in your life, both professionally and personally."

Part B of the book is interesting because it exactly mimics the chapters in Part A, with the same numbering except with the suffix "B". These "B" chapters provide "How to" responses to deal with, or better yet, avoid, the fuzziness-of-language described in Part A. As the author explains it:⁶

"In other words:

- Part A = Why do we need to replace subjectivity with objectivity and establish a Common Performance Language?
- Part B = How do we go about doing it?

This structure gives you the option to read in any order you please. If a particular scenario in Part A leaves you wanting to know how to practice it, go ahead and read the corresponding chapter in Part B. If you prefer to focus on the examples, without the implementation detail, stay in Part A."

What we liked

For clarity, author Rex Conner provides some examples of fuzzy directions, fuzzy guidance and/or fuzzy expectations such as:⁷

- We need more teamwork
- Be a self-starter
- Take some initiative
- Provide world-class service
- Make better decisions . . .

Editor's Note: Have you spotted the fuzzy phrases? (Teamwork; self-starter; initiative; world-class; better decisions and similar.) To this list you can probably add most, if not all, project management so-called disciplines like: governance; program; project; and project management. All of these are "subjective" unless defined "objectively" so that there can be no misunderstanding of what is required.

The last three chapters of Rex's book cover:⁸

- How to: Create Just One People Performance System™
- How to: Reduce Conflict to Retain High Quality People, and
- A Common Sense Assessment Tool

These chapters provide actual examples of the application of Rex's advice in tabular or graphic form, as applied to any professional health system.⁹ For example, a "Complete Job Description" covering health care shows three columns covering Task List, Skill List and Job Requirements respectively. There is also a Performance Analysis Flowchart.¹⁰

Developing standards, or references, such as these takes a lot of careful thought and practical testing through live feedback. But if the outcome is more efficient work and happier workers, the effort is well worthwhile. So in summary, a key part of using objective language is to be to make sure you are describing an *outcome*, and *not a process*, i.e. what it looks like – not how to do it.¹¹ In our experience, this is a very common failure.

A feature that we enjoyed, in what could otherwise be rather dry material, is the lavish use of DILBERT cartoon strips carefully selected to emphasize the topic at hand. So get a copy and keep it handy for your next project.

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¹ Rex Conner, *What if Common Sense was Common Practice in Business?* From back cover, Mager Consortium,

² Ibid, Back cover.

³ Ibid, p7

⁴ Ibid, pp5-6

⁵ Ibid, p58

⁶ Ibid, pp3-4

⁷ Ibid, p8

⁸ Ibid, pp100-120

⁹ Ibid, p104

¹⁰ Ibid, p109

¹¹ Ibid, p64