

The Perfect Snowball by Ranjan Kapur, Roli & Janssen BV, 2004; pp 56, price not mentioned.

Business writers today are recognizing that in order to connect to their audience, they need to stimulate their interest and engage their imagination. More and more writers are using parables or “brief and textureless” stories (Denning 2000) to communicate complex ideas and to involve people in understanding and managing organizational realities. The tremendous success of books like “Who Moved My Cheese” by Dr. Johnson (1998), and *Fish!* (Lundin, Paul and Christensen, 2000) has contributed to the belief that the right formula for teaching business principles, is to tell an insightful and yet simple story.

“The Perfect Snowball” is one such simple story with some impact. It is a childlike story that gets its point across, is easy to read and grasp and has beautiful illustrations that accompany the storyline. While the story is very simple, it raises a number of issues that are relevant in one’s personal and work life. Briefly, the story is about a little boy who dreams of making the perfect snowball. Over a period of time he realizes that neither practice nor high quality material (read “purest snow”) can help him to achieve his goal. Finally, he is inspired by an idea and sets out to make the perfect snowball. Having achieved his goal the little boy finds that he is not satisfied with just making a perfect snowball but gets carried away with the idea of making it bigger and larger. In trying to climb new mountains he finds that he can no longer control the snowball and other older children take charge of the snowball, leaving the little boy far behind. Ultimately no one can control the snowball and it gathers speed, loses shape and perfection and rolls downhill, both figuratively and literally, to disintegrate into nothingness in the valley below. The little boy is determined to start afresh, and having learnt his lesson, decides never to let his perfect snowball go downhill again.

While the story is quite simple and straightforward, it provides insights and lessons on a range of organizational issues. At the first cut, it brings out the importance of having dreams (or goals) and recognizes the role of creativity and inspiration in achieving these dreams. It highlights the value of having realistic goals and the problems of being an over-achiever... and that perhaps one should not bite more than

one can chew! The story also raises issues about diseconomies of scale and how bigger is not necessarily better. At another level, the book also focuses on the importance of having some guidance and controls in managing new or creative ideas in the organization. Again, the story emphasizes the importance of learning from one's mistakes and moving on with greater determination. The story can also be seen as a lesson on communication and teamwork. It makes one ponder on how far the person can nurture his/her idea alone and what strategies he/she can engage in to communicate and share the idea with others so that they can work together to realize the dream. The story is like a Roarschach inkblot (an unstructured projective personality test), wherein different people may gain different insights from it and the more one thinks about the story, the more lessons one can learn from it.

One problem with such unstructured parables is that without some guidance, readers may not necessarily appreciate the numerous messages and themes that the story brings out. Perhaps a discussion section could have been added at the end of the book to help the reader to better understand and apply the wisdom encapsulated in the story. A common complaint about parables is that they are inspirational but lack solutions. Managers often look for business plans or answers that can help companies or individuals to better cope with issues raised in the book. Another problem with such parables is that while they make good light reading, many people find nothing new or earth shattering about them; they don't change the way one looks at business or the world one lives in. Finally, the storyline is thin and the book has the appearance of an illustrated book for toddlers, which may lead adult readers to think that the book has little substance.

However, the intention of the story and its author is not to provide answers, but to provoke thinking on the issues and themes presented in the story. Perhaps, the value of such stories lies in their reminding us of some everyday follies that we commit and the simple truths that we have lost touch with.

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References

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