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Clarion Review

What Lucy Taught Us
Walter Geer
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One of the more interesting subgenres in the business book category is the fable. Popularized in the 1980s by The One Minute Manager and in the 1990s by Who Moved My Cheese, the fable is a short story about a business challenge told in narrative style. Typically, such books offer a quick read while teaching a valuable management lesson.

Walter Geer's What Lucy Taught Us does a fine job of representing the fable style. Instead of concentrating on general management, however, Geer pinpoints business process. More often than not, business process is a painfully boring subject to read about, but Geer's fable presents readers with a refreshingly different alternative.

To dramatize the problems associated with business process, the author draws on a classic episode of the old television show, I Love Lucy, in which Lucy and her friend Ethel work in a candy factory and find themselves overwhelmed by the production line. Geer writes, "Its famous scene of Lucy and Ethel frantically wrapping candy (and missing quite a few!) resonates even more today as businesses struggle with productivity, efficiency, and the need to do more with less."

Geer proceeds to weave a tale about a new vice president of operations at a medical products company who is faced with the challenge of bringing together disparate parts of the organization. The manager is embroiled in personalities and politics while being pressured by his boss to make improvements rapidly. He turns to a colleague, who agrees to help by facilitating a meeting with the manager's direct reports. Geer ingeniously integrates the I Love Lucy episode as part of the facilitator's solution to the problem.

The president and CEO of the CA Group, a consulting organization, Geer does an excellent job of painting a picture of the company's problems. His descriptions of each character are finely drawn so as to make them believable. He provides touches of humor and drama to give the fable realism. The introduction of the facilitator into the fable makes the point that business process problems are not always easy to solve from the inside; sometimes an objective outside perspective is required.

Ultimately, the point of the story is that people in an organization usually understand their own part of the process, but not necessarily how it fits into the overall process. Often, the process itself is inefficient and needs to be corrected.

Managers in companies large and small will be able to relate to the story and take something away. The story's universal message makes it relevant to any type of business. The simple eight-step process improvement model included at the end of the fable gives managers a valuable tool to apply to their own situations.

What Lucy Taught Us is a business book that, despite its short length, is likely to have a large and lasting impact on readers.

Barry Silverstein