

# THE HALO EFFECT

dedicated to clear thinking about business and management

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## ***Be Your Own Thought Leader:***

### **What Managers Can Learn from Richard Feynman**

The business world is full of books by self-proclaimed thought leaders and so-called management gurus, eager to tell us the secrets of success and the path to greatness. Much of my book, *The Halo Effect ... and the Eight Other Business Delusions that Deceive Managers*, is aimed at unmasking the flawed thinking and unfounded claims of recent business books, ranging from *Built to Last* by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, to *What Really Works* by Bill Joyce, Nitin Nohria, and Bruce Roberson, all the way to Jim Collins's mega-hit, *Good to Great*. My goal is to help managers to see that these books are little more than storytelling masquerading as science. It's to help managers separate fact from fiction, to see through the false claims and shoddy logic of so much that surrounds us.

At the same time, I try to raise the profile of some thinkers whose ideas can be useful to discerning managers: George Orwell about the use and mis-use of language, Stephen Jay Gould about chance and probability, and Christopher Hitchens about parsimony and clarity of thinking.

In an age of blind faith in management gurus, one of these people, the physicist Richard Feynman, is worth a special look. To his fellow scientists, Feynman (1918-1988) is admired for his work on Quantum Electrodynamics (QED) that won him the Nobel Prize in 1965. To generations of students, he's revered for the Feynman Lectures, perhaps the clearest and most lucid explanation of the basic principles of physics. To the general public, he's remembered for his service on the Challenger Commission in 1986, where he helped identify the crucial role of cold temperature on the O-rings. To still others, he's the author of a witty series of memoirs, beginning with *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman*. I particularly like the collection of his essays and interviews, published as *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, with its discussion of Cargo Cult Science—an amusing lampoon of pseudoscience, which can be described as research that follows the form of science but has little predictive power.

In 2005, Feynman's daughter, Michelle, published an edited collection of his correspondence, titled *Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track*. In its Foreword, Timothy Ferris summarizes Feynman's inquisitive spirit:

He preferred clarity to profundity, questions to answers, and the hunt to the trophy on the wall. "Don't pay attention to 'authorities,'" he advised a nineteen-year-old undergraduate. "Think for yourself." When a Caltech

student asked the eminent cosmologist Michael Turner what his “bias” was in favoring one or another particle as a likely candidate to comprise dark matter in the universe, Feynman snapped, “Why do you want to know his bias? Form your own bias!”

The price for rejecting easy answers and reliance on authorities is that one must be willing to tolerate ambiguity and accept one’s own ignorance. This didn’t bother Feynman. “I can live with doubt and uncertainty,” he said. “I think it’s much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong.” He once defined science as the belief in the ignorance of experts. (p.xiii)

Ferris continued:

There are groaning shelves full of respected philosophical tomes that contain not one sentence as incisive and original as that offhand aphorism: “What is not surrounded by uncertainty cannot be the truth.” Moreover it sums up the main components of Feynman’s world—the pursuit of truth, amid a welter of uncertainty, by a researcher who will neither abandon the quest nor lose sight of his doubts. It was that spirit, the spirit of science, to which the world responded by cheering Feynman on, and he will be remembered as long as science thrives. (p.xvi)

Richard Feynman stood for a spirit of inquiry, of posing questions and following the answers no matter where they led. Take his discussion about reports of miracles at Lourdes, from *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*. Feynman writes:

It might be true that you can be cured by the miracle at Lourdes. But if it is true, it ought to be investigated . . . If the healing process works at Lourdes, the question is how far from the site of the miracle can the person, who is ill, stand? Have they in fact made a mistake and the back row is not working? Or is it working so well that there is plenty of room for more people to be arranged near the place of the miracle? (p.107)

This sort of thinking was pure Feynman. Nothing was beyond questioning, not even an apparent miracle. In fact, believers in miracles, more than anyone, should have the greatest interest in understanding how they work! They should want to know: Can someone who has touched a relic in turn touch someone else and pass along the miracle? Would the relic wear out after repeated touching? And so on. Even if one believes in the power of miraculous cures, one should *still* want to study it.

The same spirit of inquiry ought to illuminate the world of business research, and in many places it does. Yet much of what claims to be rigorous science in fact is little more than sophomoric storytelling. Of course, the authors claim exactly the reverse. Early in *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes his ambition: not just to explain why a handful of companies achieved high performance, but to discover “timeless, universal answers that can be applied by any organization.” He goes on:

While the practices of engineering continually evolve and change, the laws of physics remain relatively fixed. I like to think of our work as a search for timeless principles—the enduring physics of great organizations—that remain true and relevant no matter how the world changes around us. Yes, the specific application will change (the engineering), but certain immutable laws of organized human performance (the physics) will endure.

The irony in all of this, of course, is that real physicists don't imagine the universe to be quite as precise as wannabe physicists might imagine. The essence of scientific discovery is to see the world in terms of doubt, not certainty. It is constantly to question and to look for reasons why something may not be so, rather than to accept simplistic formulations.

This passage from *Good to Great* was, by the way, one of the sparks that led me to write *The Halo Effect*. In late 2001, I was teaching in an executive program at my institute, IMD, with a colleague had assigned Collins's book as the basis for class discussion. I read *Good to Great*, more than once, and was struck by the mention of immutable laws and timeless principles, in an earnest tone and without a trace of irony. By coincidence, that same autumn I was on a family holiday and brought along, quite by chance, Feynman's *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, with its critique of Cargo Cult Science. The comparison was irresistible. What, I asked myself, would Feynman say about Collins's research? What would a world-renowned physicist say about the reference to physics by a business guru? Would Feynman agree that Collins's work was solid and rigorous, or would he find it lacking? There was no doubt in my mind: Jim Collins's research was a prime example of Cargo Cult Science, dressed up to look like science, but utterly lacking the rigor and validity of scientific research, and devoid of predictive power. It's not just wrong, it's misleading. Collins claims to have undertaken rigorous scientific research. He writes that he and his team spent years gathering data and analyzing them. One of his dicta is to "Confront the brutal facts." But Collins does not confront the fact that his research relied on flawed data and reached mistaken conclusions—as I explain in detail in Chapter 7 of *The Halo Effect*. The result is what I call *The Delusion of Organizational Physics*—a deluded insistence that there are reliable laws of business performance that, if followed, will bring about results with the predictability of physics.

That's not to say that the study of business defies scientific inquiry. There are many examples of good, solid research about business that meet the test of science. I mention a number of them in Chapter 8 of my book. But so much of what we read isn't good science at all—it is more accurately described as *pseudoscience* and needs to be recognized as such by thinking managers.

Rather than accept the pronouncements of management gurus, we'd do better to recall the wisdom of one of the great minds of our age. Science, Richard Feynman reminds us, is about uncertainty and doubt, not immutable laws. We should remind ourselves of the ignorance of experts, even when—*especially when*—they are loathe to admit it themselves. *Don't be swayed by the biases of others. Think for yourself. Don't pay attention to authorities.* In today's business world, where we are besieged by self-promoters and so-called thought leaders, all claiming to offer the secrets to success, these words of Richard Feynman are the stuff to live by. *Be your own thought leader.*