

Weiss, Antonio E. – Key Business Solutions

Prentice Hall, 2011, [Business] Grade ★★★

Who wouldn't want the tool to solve business problems? The British-Mexican Antonio Weiss has a varied and interesting history. With an academic background as an historian of the state and religion he moved on to become a management consultant doing work for the UK public sector. The author, also a contributing expert to Latin News and a Labor party activist, will soon publish an exploration of the religious beliefs of Margaret Thatcher funded by the Margaret Thatcher foundation.

Weiss' basic thesis is that business leaders - like most people – often lack a method to solve problems. This book is meant to deliver a proven methodology to guide the reader successfully through the problem solving process. The subtitle is “Essential business-solving tools and techniques that every manager needs to know”. I like what Weiss has written but I also think the book misses its mark with regards to the thesis. It does not deliver problem-solving tools for managers; it delivers project management techniques for management consultants or project managers trying to deliver a recommendation to solve a business problem. Hence, the author delivers a McKinsey-BCG-Bain-type of process answer to a more broad and general topic. With that said the so-called OBTAIN-model is among the better descriptions of this type of process that I've read.

There are two parts to the book where the first by one chapter per letter describes the OBTAIN-project management process and the second part lists a number of business tools like the 4P's of marketing, SWOT-analysis etc. In short the letters in OBTAIN stands for: Outline – frame the problem into a goal that you need to achieve; Break Down – separate the problem into manageable pieces that are easier to solve; Test – relatively early in the process a hypothetical solution should be developed and then this is tested, discarded or refined; Analyze – do the analysis to get to the root of the problem and verify your hypothesis; Imagine – come up with an

innovative solution that is developed jointly with key stakeholders; Notify – have the right techniques to communicate the solution. In addition, there are the two steps (and chapters) on managing the stakeholders and managing the project team.

For each process step one or two useful tools (like for example the Hypothesis Tree or the Prioritization Matrix) are presented. I also liked the chapter on how to communicate the solution (not surprisingly with a McKinsey-Barbara Minto type of presentation structure). Part two of the book feels more like an appendix even though some of the tools, like De Bono's Six Thinking Hats, perhaps can be said to be closer to the more generic theme of the subtitle.

When I come in contact with the early-hypothesis driven management consultant model I'm always reminded of a quotation from Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes that has become popular among investors “*The temptation to form premature theories upon insufficient data is the bane of our profession*” – the point being that if you decide on a solution too early your research process will risk falling victim to confirmatory bias. On the other hand it is obviously equally true that more information has declining marginal utility and if you decide too late a lot of effort will have been a waste of time. The consultant leans towards an earlier decision than the investor with regards to this trade off.

Further, I get the nagging feeling that such a strict process focus as in the OBTAIN-model could come in the way of solutions that really changes the playing field. The focus is to come up with “the right” solution that can be accepted by all stakeholders. This type of solution will probably lead to satisfied paying customers, but I'm not sure it goes further than that.

If you work at a corporate strategy department or are an aspiring management consultant this is a very useful book to read.

Mats Larsson, February 15, 2015