Leaders Book Club - Black Box Thinking

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Black Box Thinking

by Matthew Syed

Phil Horsely, Managing Director of Geomarine reviews Black Box Thinking for our Leaders Book Club

How is flying safe?

According to Boeing, there are around 2.3 million parts to the Dreamliner. According to Matthew Syed, it is the culture and practices around failure that ensure that those of us who fly are alive and well.

Comparing and, more crucially, contrasting the aviation and medical industries gives a fascinating background to the threads that Black Box Thinking brings together. I re-read it due to my compiling a book list for our senior leadership team. It purports to analyse 'marginal gains and the secrets of high performance' and I recalled being impressed back in 2015 on its release. This strapline does not do it justice. Marginal gains are clearly explained, they are also critiqued in that they will not lead to the innovative change required to avoid what Netflix did to Blockbuster.

Many business books suffer from padding out a neat concept that could be explained in fifty to a hundred pages to get to a full-length book. Black Box Thinking differentiates itself in being a genuinely fascinating study of complex environments and how we can excel in them. The section on cognitive dissonance alone is worthy of its own book. It is at the heart of another modern classic, Wilful Blindness by Margaret Heffernan, and is a concept that every senior manager should fully understand. The lessons in Black Box Thinking will

help put systems around biases to ensure that when we suffer from it, and we all suffer from it, that there are clear warning signs.

Sayed covers subjects such as the logic of failure, complexity and how to innovate. He challenges, if not obliterates, the notion of humans as rational creatures, and introduces concepts and strategies for overcoming the potentially shambolic way we make decisions. Success is, it is contended, a system.

Using examples as varied as wrongful convictions, how Toy Story was written and the process used to design the high-pressure nozzle involved in washing powder manufacturing, the book provides a compelling and entertaining read as well as delivering serious messages.

Alongside practical examples, philosophers from Aristotle to Bacon are entertainingly weaved in with relevance and intelligence. Black Box Thinking made the list for the senior team. It belongs with the classics of business literature and introduces many concepts worthy of further study. Having said that, I agree with most of what Matthew Syed says, and will continue to fly without much concern, so may be suffering from cognitive dissonance.