
LEADERSHIP

CLAYTON CHRISTENSEN'S PERSONAL QUEST TO HELP YOU MEASURE YOUR LIFE

BY: DRAKE BAER



Since graduating from Harvard Business School in 1979, Clayton M. Christensen has observed personal tragedies in the lives of his fellow MBAs, from a string of unhappy marriages, estranged children, and messy divorces, to enormous scandal--classmate Jeffrey Skilling was CEO of Enron. He knew that none had a deliberate strategy for broken homes or jail time--yet that was what they implemented. Christensen is interested in why.

An HBS professor since 1992, he has dedicated himself to understanding cause and effect: His best-selling and influential book *The Innovator's Dilemma* investigated business disruption, and his newest, *How Will You Measure Your Life?*, examines the mechanisms behind the decisions that lead a person to a fulfilling existence--or a jail cell.

Fast Company recently talked to Christensen about feeling a need for achievement, how an interview with God might go, and how management is a noble profession. This interview has been

condensed and edited.

FAST COMPANY: *In How Will You Measure Your Life?*, you talk about attending Harvard Business School reunions and seeing classmates who were clearly unhappy despite their professional accomplishments. Is this book in response to that?



CLAYTON M. CHRISTENSEN: That's a good way to put it. It's one thing to say that life happens to you, and so some people will end up unhappy and some will be happy and it's just the luck of the draw. I actually don't think that that's true. Things happen to us in unpredictable ways, but the effect that that has on the kind of people who we become actually is not only open to chance--we can influence it in pretty profound ways.

How can people do that?

I believe that we can, in a deliberate way, articulate the kind of people we want to become. We can articulate the culture that we would want to exist in our family, and you can then, as the rest of life happens to you, you can utilize those things to help you become the kind of person you want to be.

You draw strong parallels in the book between growing a career, a company, cultivating one's personal or interior life, and building a family life. What is consistent across these four spheres?

The world is a nested space, and so we have our brain as a person, and people are members of teams, and teams are part of business units, and business units are parts of corporations, and corporations are part of industries, which are part of economies. And what we've been trying to figure out is, are there fundamental statements of causality that are the same across all of these units?

And we really have concluded that there are. They each have their own vocabulary, but the fundamental causal mechanism is very much the same. I would say that one of those is the resource-allocation process.

Can you describe how that process works?

You have businesses, just like IBM has a bunch of different businesses that they're engaged in. Through a resource-allocation process, you decide how much goes to this business, how much goes to that business. You have businesses in your life: family, relationships, career. And you have to decide how do you allocate your resources. If you decide, "I'm going stay at work another hour," you allocate energy and time and talent to your career that you won't spend with your kids; that's a resource-allocation process. That criteria that we employ is scarily, frightfully consistent up and down. That is--in all these businesses, the one that will get prioritized is the one that pays off the fastest.

We decry how businesses always are short-term oriented, and we know that they should invest for the long term, but man, none of them are able to do that on a consistent basis. And the reason is that they're run by people like you and me, and almost all of us have this need of achievement. And so when you have an extra ounce of time, an ounce of energy, if you spend that time on your career--you finish an article, you ship a product, you close a deal, you finish a presentation, you get promoted, you get paid. Our careers provide immediate evidence that you've achieved something.

But the kids, they misbehave every day. It's not until much later when you can say, "Spence, [my son], is 24. And boy, he's a good man." But on a day-to-day basis, it's a long-term investment that you have to make.

So how do we correct that blind spot?

The most important answer is just to understand how this works inside of ourselves--whether we're looking at managing our careers or managing our family or managing our company. Understanding how things work and why they work the way they

work allows you then to make conscious decisions about this. If you don't understand this, then you just do what makes sense at the time and that causes you to end up in a different place than you want.

How do you measure *your* life?

Now, to me, this was a religious process. But I really believe a lot more people could use this process than who do. We tried to describe other ways to get there, which were, in the end, I think a little convoluted. But they come out in a very similar space.

What the purpose of my life is about is I want to become the kind of person that God wants me to become, and through my study of the scriptures I can articulate the kind of person that God would be happy if I become. People that take another route to that very same thing if they list the kind of person they want to become, in order to influence other people for the good.

You do that, and then you have to figure out: "How do I measure my life, if this is what I want to be?"

When I have my interview with God, he's not even going to point out that I was professor at Harvard Business School. He's just going to say, "Clay, I stuck you in this situation, let's talk about the individual people you helped to become better people. You had one unanticipated interaction with this guy, let's talk about what you did"--that's the way he'll measure it.

How would you secularize that?

Maybe I would say that everyone would be judged at the end. People might not believe that there's a God that will assess what we did, but certainly everybody who knows you will assess what you did. The fact that you are no longer here may just be a fleeting thought because you didn't make an impact on them for the good. Or it may be that you affected them for ill; then they could actually be quite happy that you're...you know.

Or it may be that you affected them in profound ways, so that they remember you long after you're gone, because of the impact that you had on them. And I think that everybody cares about how they will be judged.

One thing you're trying to do is help people find work that is fulfilling, and you've said that management is a noble profession. Can you expand on that?

It bothers me that so many of our students believe that management is the buying and selling of companies, and acquisitions, and mergers, and divestitures.

There are other words for that, but that's not management. Management is getting people together to figure out how to transform inputs into outputs. In the process of figuring out the process of how people work together, you've got to figure out who's got what responsibilities and how do they work together. You can either do it in a way that minimizes or demeans people who work in this enterprise that you've created, or you can make them feel noble, like they've achieved something, like they've learned something every day, and that they really are important to the enterprise.

And I really believe that being able to put your hands on your hips every day and declare, "I accomplished something that was important, I was recognized for it, I was a critical part of a team that's moving together," there is no other profession in the world that gives you so many levers to help people feel that way about themselves.

A teacher can't do it, a psychologist or a sociologist can't do it, a writer can't do it--and that's why I call it a noble profession if practiced well.

[Image: Flickr user Gato Gato Gato]

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