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How Ups and Downs Move Us Forward

by Chris Lauer

PEAKS AND VALLEYS: MAKING GOOD AND BAD TIMES WORK FOR YOU — AT WORK AND IN LIFE

by Spencer Johnson, M.D.

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Business fables are more than simple fairy tales placed in a business setting. While both genres are fictitious, imaginative and entertaining, the element that separates the two is the extent of their link to reality.

A good fairy tale gracefully removes readers from reality by exploring magical realms where anything is possible, even the unbelievable. But a good business fable serves a completely different purpose. Instead of taking its readers away from reality, it helps them to get closer to it through a smart story that connects them to the deeper meanings that real-life stories can sometimes miss because of the specificity of their details. The best of these fables leave us with relevant wisdom we can apply directly to our organizations, our careers and our lives. In his latest book, *Peaks and Valleys*, best-selling author Spencer Johnson shows readers what a great business fable can do by providing volumes of wisdom in a short story that fills just 101 pages.

Business fables have been around for many years, helping people focus their skills and ideas so they can become more successful in their organizations. There was a time when publishers wondered whether busi-

ness fables would ever grow beyond a niche and move into the mainstream of the business book market. Johnson is one of the authors who settled all doubts about the validity of the business fable as a bestseller.

Johnson co-authored *Who Moved My Cheese?* with Ken Blanchard. In that book — perhaps the world's most widely read book on change — the authors use fictional people and mice in a maze to demonstrate how we can all improve the ways we cope with life's inevitable changes.

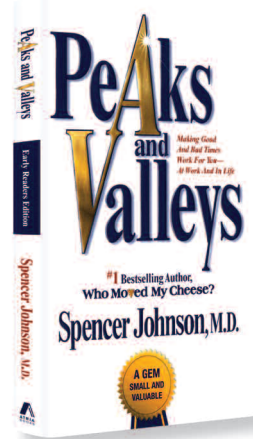
Who Moved My Cheese? also helped millions of readers realize just how valuable a good business fable can be to those seeking an entertaining way to learn strategies to excel personally and professionally rather than reading case studies and best practices in non-fiction business books.

Proliferation of Business Fables

After the success of *Who Moved My Cheese?* dozens of other writers began dabbling in business fables to transmit their own business acumen to the world. Many of these fables have become valu-

able learning tools because their general tales about business struggles and successes allow them to transcend specific circumstances so they can be applied to innumerable situations.

For example, one author whose books have become bestsellers because of his succinct business fables is consultant Patrick Lencioni. His many books, such as *Silos*, *Politics*, and *Turf Wars*; *Death by Meeting*; *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job*; and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, have all helped businesspeople understand their work and their lives better by presenting fictitious char-



acters who deal with very real organizational issues. The lessons they pass on transcend the fictitious nature of their stories and help real people in the real world improve their professional work and their personal lives.

Lencioni is only one of dozens of writers who have turned to the business fable as a way to help them share their unique ideas. Although several other book authors have made successful careers out of writing business fables, Johnson remains one of the most respected authors and self-help gurus in the world because he has mastered the art of writing business fables that tell important stories using fictitious characters whose make-believe adventures reflect the journeys that many people take through the real business world.

A Story Within a Story

In *Peaks and Valleys*, Johnson tells the story of a man who is looking for help during a tough time in his work and life. In a small café, he meets a friend of a friend who has had similar experiences, but she is now in a better spot because she found a useful, new philosophy. She tells him how she was once at the top of the world, but she soon found herself losing steam when her team at work began to become complacent after recent successes. When the stress at work became too much, she found an antidote to her doldrums in the form of a story she was told by someone who helped her solve many of her problems. She then tells that story to her new acquaintance.

The story she tells fills *Peaks and Valleys* with a parable about a young man in a valley who seeks a better way to live and work. To improve his position and gain a better perspective, he ventures to the top of a nearby mountain that looms above his valley. After some struggles, he finds himself at the top. Not surprisingly, he finds a wise man living there. As they talk, the old man shares some sage wisdom with the young man that he can take back into the valley to improve his work and life. The old man calls his way of thinking his “Peaks and Valleys philosophy.”

After the young man returns to the valley, the old man’s advice works for a little while, but the young man finds himself losing ground once again, so he climbs back up the mountain for a refresher course in the old man’s philosophy. During both trips, the old man on the mountain, who is a peaceful and successful businessman

who has had his own ups and downs in life and business, helps the young man develop a better way to deal with the peaks and valleys he finds in his life. The old man plays the role of sage to his younger counterpart.

The Universal Principles Are Basic

Johnson’s story within a story breaks down the complexities of business and personal life into a parable that offers many principles that are universal in their application. While some might say they are too simple or abstract for the highly complex digital age of the 21st century, critics need only look at the list of salient points that Johnson encapsulates throughout his book to understand that these universal truths are important, yet so basic that they are often forgotten in the whirlwind of daily life. The simple reminders Johnson provides about what is important and how to get from a low spot to a higher spot, and how to stay at a higher spot for longer, are wonderful remedies to the complicated information overload we often experience during the daily business grind.

Part Buddhist master, part shaman and part business guru, Johnson uses his simple tale to distill daily and corporate life into a straightforward business treatise, offering all readers a basic philosophy that can help them

both personally and professionally.

Johnson’s message transcends the parable in which it is contained because the circumstances faced by his characters are as real as any difficulties we experience in our own lives. By showing how our perceptions of situations influence the duration of our good times and our difficult times, Johnson helps readers deal with the challenges they face at work and at home. The stories he reveals demonstrate how a longer-range perspective can improve both work and life by making them more peaceful and productive.

Arrogance Pushes Us Off the Peaks

In a recent interview with Jerome Ritchey on Studio 10 TV in St. Petersburg, Fla., Johnson explained several of the pieces of wisdom that he develops in *Peaks and Valleys*. One of them is the idea that “arrogance, masquerading as confidence” can be one of the reasons why somebody on a peak loses his or her place, only to sink back down into a valley. Similarly, he explained, the inverse is just as profound. The reason why people get stuck in valleys for too long is because

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of fear, which can feel like comfort to the valley dweller and keep him or her down longer than necessary.

During the interview, Johnson said, “All of us have ups and downs. But if we realize that arrogance takes us off the peaks, we’ll stay humble. We’ll be grateful. We’ll not spend all of our money. We’ll look at the truth. We won’t become self-centered. That’s a mistake that many of us make when we’re on a peak, and we pay a big price for it because we create more of our valleys than we think.

“We’ve been raised to think peaks and valleys happen to us, but it’s the mistakes you make on a peak that create your valleys, and it’s the wise things you do in a valley that take you to your next peak,” Johnson continued. “And fear immobilizes you. Fear is not realistic.”

Fear Keeps Us in the Valleys

Johnson admits that some fear can be useful because it helps us remain awake and aware, but it can be harmful when it keeps us from seeing the truth in a situation that can take us out of a difficult time.

Johnson’s book is not the first to tackle the impact of fear in the pursuit of excellence. There have been other titles in the past that acknowledge the role of fear as a motivator, even going so far as to suggest that it is necessary for reaching greater levels of success. Johnson does a great job of separating the existence of fear from the idea that it’s an integral part of self improvement. His musings on fear in *Peaks and Valleys* will provide executives with a better base from which to handle a very common hurdle.

Another message Johnson shares in his book is the idea that we can learn much about the Peaks and Valleys philosophy by looking at the tracings of a heart monitor. The line of a heartbeat goes up and down with small, flat lines in between. He points out that this heart tracing is very indicative of the way life works.

First, peaks are always followed by valleys, and valleys are always followed by peaks. Neither is permanent. Second, there are times when a flat line appears between peaks and valleys. These times represent the short plateaus of rest and renewal we need in order to perform better during our ups and downs. And third, as the old man in Johnson’s story says, the heart tracing is a reminder that the Peaks and Valleys approach must be used with your heart. In other words, how you *feel* about the insights gained during peak or valley experiences is as important as what you *do* with those insights.

We Need to Be Realistic About Life

Five Business Fables

The business fable has proven popular in the 21st century. Here are a few of the most popular titles in this genre:

- **Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results** by Stephen C. Lundin, Ph.D., Harry Paul and John Christensen. Hyperion (2000). This business fable offers a philosophy that helps people at all levels of a company bring more energy and passion to their work.
- **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable** by Patrick Lencioni. Jossey-Bass (2002). In this business fable, Lencioni offers leaders a model they can use to overcome the common hurdles that prevent them from building effective teams.
- **High Five! The Magic of Working Together** by Ken Blanchard, Sheldon Bowles, Don Carew and Eunice Parisi-Carew. William Morrow (2000). Management guru Ken Blanchard and his three co-authors describe how teamwork can be built in any kind of organization.
- **The Paradox of Excellence: How Great Performance Can Kill Your Business** by David Mosby and Michael Weissman. Jossey-Bass (2005). This groundbreaking book describes how the more good work you do in your job, the more invisible you can become.
- **Walk Softly and Carry a Big Idea: A Fable — The Seven Keys to Finding Meaning, Passion and Balance in Your Life and Work** by Don Jones. John Wiley & Sons Canada (2002). This fable is about the soft skills that make a hard difference at work and in life.

Throughout *Peaks and Valleys*, Johnson describes how humility is key to the Peaks and Valleys philosophy. He explains that this merely means being realistic about your life.

The old man at the top of the mountain reminds our protagonist that he must stay focused on what is true, and not get bogged down in either irrational fear, which keeps people down in a valley for too long, or ego-driven arrogance, which can knock anyone off a peak too early.

The humility of realism also helps people who are in a valley because it allows them to see past their current difficulties. One of the ways people can get out of a slump is

to ask one of the primary questions Johnson poses in his book, “What is the truth in this situation?”

Instances like the above are what lend strength to the business fable as a teaching tool. Johnson is able to use the plot of his fable to express his exact point. He doesn’t have to attempt to draw parallels that may or may not hold water upon further scrutiny by readers. Additionally, the business fable prevents him from having to use case studies from recent events. The business fable, much like its fictional counterpart, has a timeless quality that won’t lose its shine once certain companies are no longer making headlines.

Valleys and Peaks Are Temporary

One of the underlying truths about valleys, Johnson points out, whether they come in the form of economic recessions, difficult times at work or family struggles, is that they will pass. This is also true about peaks. Remembering this and remaining realistic during peaks and valleys is a key to staying peaceful. For example, when everything is going well at work, instead of letting the ego take over and create the arrogance that can push people away, looking truthfully at a situation can remind the person at the top of his or her game that this peak is only temporary. In other words, don’t alienate other people by bragging about your peak experi-

ence because you might need those people when you are back down in a valley.

During a peak time, Johnson explains, celebrate your success, but remain humble by staying grounded in reality. Likewise, during your time in a valley, learn from your mistakes, but don’t get scared. We all make mistakes. The people who learn from their mistakes and see

them as steppingstones to better decision-making are the people who spend less time in a valley.

Time in a valley can actually be very useful if it is spent creating a sensible vision of a better future, Johnson adds. By remembering these realities, we can become less stressed and more successful.

Today Affects Tomorrow

In today’s turbulent business and economic climate, Johnson’s message is a relevant reminder of truths that are easy to forget when we

get wrapped up in our daily struggles: What we do today affects how well we do tomorrow. By demonstrating the interconnected nature of our ups and downs — our mistakes connect to our successes, and our successes can lead to our failures — *Peaks and Valleys* provides pertinent principles that help us create a more realistic view of our long journey through work and life. ●

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The author: Spencer Johnson, M.D., is the author or co-author of 11 internationally best-selling books. In 1998, he published the bestseller *Who Moved My Cheese?*® *An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change*, which has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide, becoming the most widely read book on change. He is also the co-author (with Kenneth Blanchard, Ph.D.) of *The One Minute Manager*, the world’s most popular management method for more than two decades.

Johnson received a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Southern California and M.D. status from the Royal College of Surgeons. He completed his medical clerkships at the Mayo Clinic and the Harvard Medical School. Johnson has served as Leadership Fellow at the Harvard Business School and is currently Advisor to the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government.

The Associated Press, the BBC, CNN, *FORTUNE* magazine, *the New York Times*, the *Today* show, *Time* magazine, *USA Today* and United Press International have all featured Johnson’s work. More than 46 million copies of his books are in print worldwide in more than 47 languages.

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