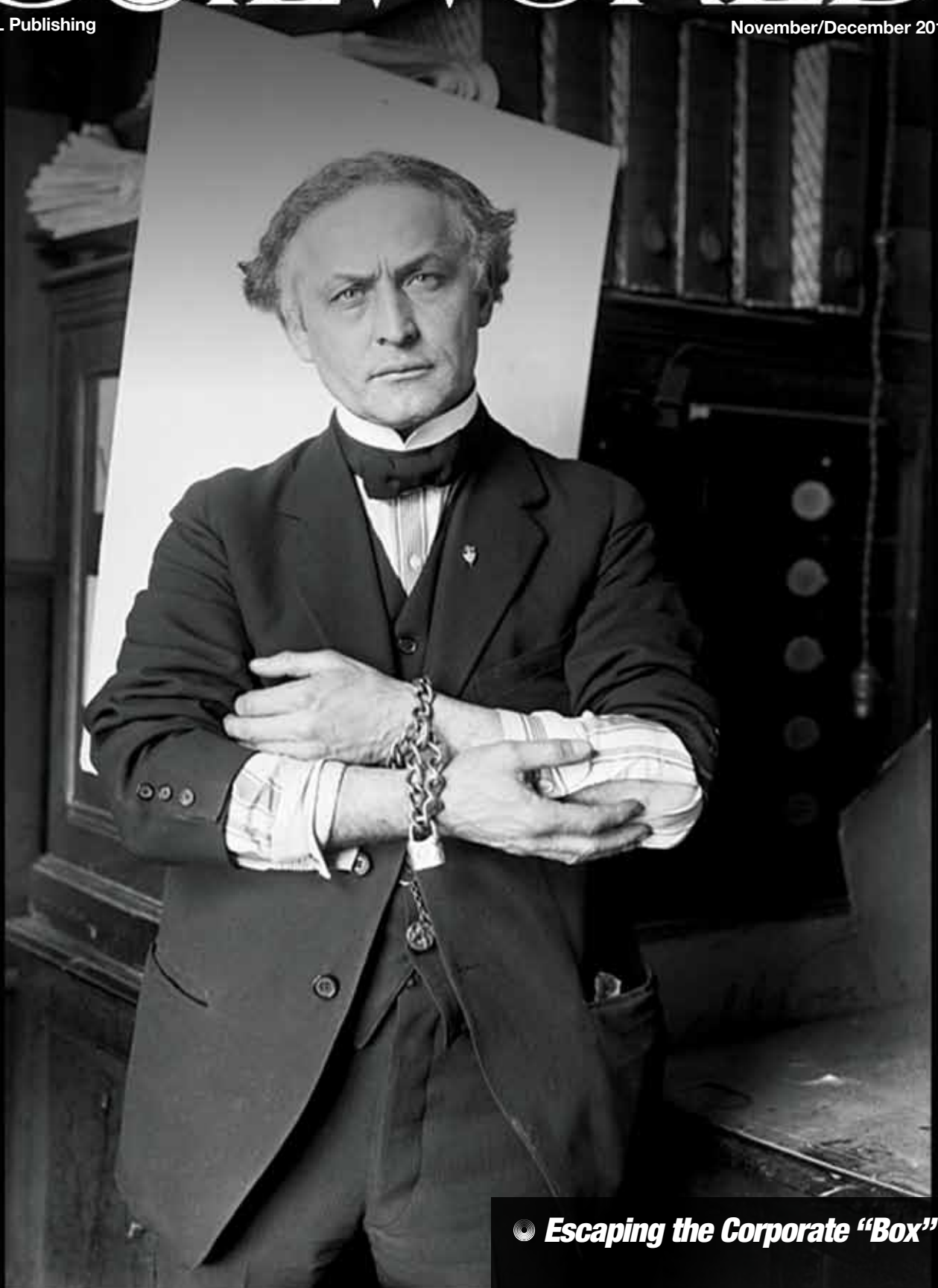


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● *Escaping the Corporate "Box"*



Houdini's Secrets: Escaping the Corporate "Box"

By Ron Felber, President, Chemetall Americas

On November 27, 1906 escape artist Harry Houdini had himself put in manacles, elbow irons, and two sets of handcuffs before being locked in an iron-weighted wooden trunk that was sealed shut and fastened with iron bonds. At a signal from his assistant, the trunk was lowered from the Belle Isle Bridge into the freezing Detroit River. From ferry boats that bobbed along the river, an eager press corps watched, along with thousands of spectators, as the sealed trunk stayed submerged beneath the icy waters for more than fifteen minutes after which they saw Houdini emerge, now in dry clothes, once again having defied the odds for serious injury, perhaps even death.

Much has been written about the extraordinary feats of Harry Houdini: How he escaped from handcuffs and leg irons suspended high above city streets. How he extricated himself from bank vaults, the prison cells of notorious criminals and from entire prisons, themselves. How he had himself lashed against the open barrel of a cannon with a time fuse and vowed to free himself or be "blown to Kingdom Come." How he consented to be shackled, then buried alive in a sealed coffin under six feet of earth and clawed his way back from the grave. Devotees of magic have long discussed how he managed to perform these feats. Biographers have probed the personal issues that drove him to do it in the first place. Yet, little attention has been paid to the cultural aspect of his career and what lessons it might teach us about escaping

the corporate "box".

In order to understand the corporate "box" of today, we would do well to examine the period of Houdini's greatest success. Born the son of an itinerant Rabbi, Erik Weisz's first escape was from poverty. In one of his early magic tricks, Houdini's wife Bess would disappear from a wooden cabinet and later reappear, having metamorphosed into Harry himself. But his most important metamorphosis was to transform himself from Erik Weisz (later Weiss), a struggling factory worker, into Harry Houdini, "Great Self Liberator of the Age." Escape for Houdini, then, became more than just "getting away". It was a metaphor for transformation from weakness to strength, from anonymity to heroism, from the confinement of modern life to the gaining of freedom.

Consider the fact that at the time of Houdini's birth, clerical workers were less than 1% of the workforce. By 1900 their ranks had swelled to 3% and nearly 5% by 1910. During that same period, titanic corporation arose with incredible swiftness: Standard Oil, U.S. Steel, American Telephone and Telegraph and Pennsylvania Railroad to name a few. Through intense mechanization, division of labor and 'scientific management', industrialists endeavored to departmentalize all aspects of production and to reduce workers' bodies to components of a great machine. In 1911, Henry Ford articulated his vision of maximum industrial efficiency declaring, "In the past,

the man has been first; in the future, the system must always be first.”

Houdini appealed to people’s hunger for miracles in a disenchanted world. He brilliantly dramatized the manifold challenges to individual freedom giving them tangible shape. By demonstrating the isolated man’s ability to confront and defeat the most palpable threats to his body, he became a powerful symbol of individual resistance to intimidation and domination in other spheres.

Turning this war for self liberation to our own times of “mandatory productivity gains”, “fully-integrated computerization”, “bottom-line orientation” and “globalization”, there is much to learn from Houdini about the art of escaping the corporate “box”. In 2002, with top-down management styles more in vogue than ever, it is all too easy to cast aside the lessons for middle managers taught by Tom Peters’ *In Search Of Excellence* and fall victim to a management style of simply “doing what I’m told”, rather than contributing, innovating and continuously improving. Still, even as Houdini battled and beat the confines of turn-of-the-century America, we too must force our own one-man revolutions. It will take courage and daring, but in our own way each of us must become magicians challenging our people to be better, not just more productive; living the principles that our own sense of decency tell us will perpetuate the organization successfully into the future, and becoming crusaders for the preservation of stakeholder value in addition to the creation of short term shareholder wealth.

The corporate “box” may be imposed upon us, but most often it is self constructed and our shackles are imagined owing to lack of confidence, or imagination, or assumed positional authority. As often as not, our perceived constraints exist because we allow them to be put on us without questioning, or even understanding what has happened.

What follows, then, are Houdini’s secrets. Read them carefully and you, too, may become the Great Self-Liberator of Our Age!

Houdini Secret #1, COURAGE

In the case of young Erik Weiss, there occurred by calculated decision a genuine metamorphosis. Starting out as the permanent witness to Rabbi Weiss’ limitations, and being the entrapped son of a destitute widow, he shrewdly re-invented himself to become the “Eternal Evader... master magician, fearless defier of death!” The superlatives pour forth like a river whose source must emanate from courage based upon mastery of fear. Instead of being constrained by self-doubt, one must find liberation through fearlessness. This is not to say that fear ceases to exist, but rather that it is converted to professional advantage. When asked by a reporter, “What was the best piece of advice your father gave you?” Houdini’s response was significant, “You’re old a lot longer than you’re young,” he answered. Herein lies a truth about Houdini and, perhaps, about ourselves.

As a young man he understood what many fail to recognize in a long lifetime: Life does not go on forever. The window of opportunity for success and self-fulfillment is smaller than we realize. In a study done by a team of Georgetown University psychologist among terminally ill patients the most common answer to the question, “What would you have done differently, if you could live life over again?” was “Take more risks.”

The Great Houdini took risks of two kinds. The first was risk to body and limb. The second, though subtle, was certainly more pervasive as he, came eye to eye with failure and humiliation, almost on a daily basis. Interestingly, Houdini was never viewed as impertinent. He respected himself, his audience, and even the societal institutions he frequently turned the tables upon. “It has been my good fortune,” he once wrote, “to meet personally and converse with the chiefs of police and detectives in all of the great cities of the world...I admire their work as many of them admire mine.”

It was Houdini’s unique ability to be brash, and yet ultimately respectful that allowed him to achieve what was his greatest escape - to gravitate from societal outlaw to member of society’s elite. At the height of his fame, ministers preached on ‘Life’s Straightjackets,’ on ‘Houdini and the Art of Escaping the Devil’s Grip,’ or against drink: ‘When whiskey ties you up you STAY tied.’ After seeing him do the Chinese Water Torture Cell, Woodrow Wilson said to him, “I envy your ability of escaping out of tight places. Sometimes I wish I were able to do the same.”

Houdini had mastered fear of darkness, water, airless enclosures, dizzying heights and even death, but more than any other figure of his day, he agonizingly and publicly put himself on the brink of failure; an act of courage and defiance that was at the center of his success.

CEO Gordon Bethune took a number of courageous stands in the turn-around of Continental Airlines. Despite the fact that revenues were plummeting, he chose to eliminate dozens of point-to-point routes and did it with the help of Bonnie Reite, an employee who ran their sales and distribution department. “The suggestions came as a result of Continental’s ‘open-door’ policy,” Bethune observed. “With fewer seats out there we were able to see where our prices were ridiculously low, and we raised our prices. Suddenly, we were flying fewer planes, but making more money.” Not only did Ms. Reite have the courage to take her plans directly to the CEO, but also Bethune respected his employees enough to listen, then made courageous decisions based on that good advice.

In business, as in magic, the first secret to escaping the corporate “box” is courage mixed, paradoxically, with mutual respect.



Houdini Secret #2, SELF-DISCIPLINE AND STUDY

“I practice card tricks seven or eight hours a day,” Houdini once told a reporter from the Denver Times, “as consistently as a Paderewski at the piano.” What he left out was the fact that additionally he challenged himself through self discipline and study to become one of the strongest men in the world, a master locksmith, first class inventor, author, showman and swimmer capable of holding his breath underwater for nearly five full minutes.

Houdini’s most compelling stage escape, the “Chinese Water Torture Cell” depended on conscientious study of both risk and possibility. He began by displaying on stage an imposing metal-lined mahogany cabinet, less than six feet high and less than three feet square, with an inch-thick plate-glass window in front. He solemnly explained its features and how he would attempt to escape under seemingly impossible conditions: Locked upside down inside, his ankles shackled, and completely immersed in water. Slowly and dramatically, he was hoisted aloft and lowered headfirst into the cell, his entire body visible underwater through the glass. Assistants locked the frame in place, fastened the trunk with padlocked steel bands, and then curtained off the entire cabinet from view. A minute passed, then two and three. Spectators invited to try to hold their breath had long since given up; some fainted. Then, suddenly, Houdini thrust the curtain aside and strode forward, dripping wet and smiling triumphantly. Yet, when Houdini entered his contraption and after he escaped, the audience would see no signs of panic, rage or terror in his face. His composure, his glacial self-control, was part of the rigor of his act.

The only way for someone to be genuinely well grounded is to arrive at what Quality guru Edwards Demming calls “deep understanding”. One may attempt to master one’s innermost fears, but the confidence necessary to be successful in that undertaking can only be derived from a deep knowledge of oneself and the work that one chooses.

Every facet of Honda of America’s BP program for global competitiveness is an example of this. Originally begun in Japan in 1979, it is an offspring of Demming’s post-World War II “Quality Circles”. Honda’s Best Position, Productivity, Product, Price and Partners concept is based on four major tenets, all derived from study and discipline: Study the Customer, Study the Competition, Study the Process, Develop your Plan and have the Organizational Discipline to act.

Honda’s founder, Soichiro Honda, once said, “Analysis with action is a lethal weapon; action without analysis or analysis without action is worthless.” 🌟

Editors note: This article is Part 1 of a two part series. The second part of this article will be presented in our Jan/Feb 2015 issue.

Editor Note: The following is Part Two of the “Houdini’s Secrets: Escaping the Corporate “Box” article which appeared in Coil World’s Nov/Dec 2014 issue.

Houdini’s Secrets: Escaping the Corporate “Box”

By Ron Felber, President, Chemetall Americas

Houdini Secret #3, RESOURCEFULNESS

Houdini used society’s symbols of repression – handcuffs, straightjackets, ropes, manacles, even ancient devices of torture – as props integral to his exploits. Men were everywhere in chains of one kind or another, he was showing us, but most often they had created their own chains and, like him, could lose them if they were willing to pay the price.

“I defy the police departments of the world to hold me... I challenge any police official to handcuff me!” Houdini’s challenge to authorities was taken up by many law enforcement officials. One came from the warden of Boston’s Somerset Street prison, known as the Tombs, regarded by city police as “escape proof”. Houdini accepted and in a ground floor cell shed “every stitch of his clothing” which was then locked inside the cell. On the second floor, the police superintendent searched him from the “hair on his head to the soles of his feet.” The warden clamped the department’s best handcuffs on him, fastening his left wrist high on the cell door and his right one down to floor level. He then shackled Houdini’s ankles, locked the cell door and led police witnesses to his office confident Houdini wasn’t going anywhere. But only sixteen minutes later, reporters waiting outside saw Houdini, now fully clothed, scale the outer wall of the prison yard, vault over the railing, and jump into a waiting car.

Similar escapes from society’s institutions of confinement ranging from handcuffs in Scotland Yard to a prison cell in Washington, D.C. and straightjackets in Dresden were adroitly used as part of Houdini’s act. Here was a man with no formal education, no societal credentials or positional authority luring modern civilization’s most imposing institutions, law enforcement, into public contests which left him – the quasi-criminal – richer and freer while those who society charged with imprisoning were left to explain their transgressions to an anxious public.



In a world where managers can so easily find themselves trapped in statistical “boxes” and bureaucracy, good positions are like safes and Houdini made his audience think about what social advancement felt like. Sometimes you would need magic to get ahead, he was telling them; you needed to have cunning, a kind of “criminal intelligence” that saw openings, indeed created them.

The flagging fortunes of Taco Bell were revived through resourcefulness when CEO John Martin and his team turned conventional wisdom on its head by seeing hidden opportunities that competitors could not. “Our problem was that we viewed Taco Bell as mortar and brick buildings. Then one day we saw a different possibility. Why did we need expensive buildings, or buildings at all? We were in the business of getting food to people who wanted to buy tacos and so we decided to act as we saw things selling our products, not only through restaurants, but ‘points of distribution’: Corner stands, vending machines, stadium outlets, mobile kitchens. This was the ‘twist’ in thinking that changed everything...our sales rocketed by 38% in the first year.”

In the modern sense, Houdini specialized. He exploited a narrow niche of anticipations in his audience and satisfied them. Like a performer, the corporate manager is in the business of gaining and holding people’s attention. Business resourcefulness has to do with a primordial survival instinct that translates sets of circumstances good or bad into hidden opportunities that can be seized and acted upon. It is with this “sleight of hand” that the metamorphosis occurs and, at its best, one finds oneself outside rather than inside the corporate “box”.

Houdini Secret #4, COMPETITIVE SPIRIT

Early in his career, as a struggling performer, Houdini had the honor of entertaining Theodore Roosevelt on a transatlantic voyage aboard the American Line "Imperator" where he, and a group of other passengers, had their picture taken with the president. Afterward, Houdini requested the negative, had the five other men carefully airbrushed out, then gleefully distributed hundreds of copies of the new photograph of himself with his 'pal' President Teddy Roosevelt during a cruise they had taken together!

The competitive spirit exercised here distinguished Houdini from the other magicians of his time. By keeping company with a national hero, he implicitly aligned himself not only with the man, but also with his hyper-masculine image as a Rough Rider, physical fitness enthusiast and the champion of metamorphosis - having transformed himself from a sickly child to President of the United States.

Houdini's obsession with success is amply demonstrated in his dealings with "competition." By 1910, with too many people beginning to imitate his new art forms, he left the field for more adventurous terrain, but vengefully. "NO HANDCUFFS," he would advertise on his posters and published a 110 page illustrated book with the ironic title *Handcuff Secrets*. Affecting to hope that his readers might become "adept at entertaining and mystifying their friends," he was in fact disqualifying his rivals. The book was a characteristic



performance in that it appears to give away, but actually kept his secrets. "I shall not delve into the very deep intricacies of some of the great modern feats of handcuff manipulation and jail-breaking as accomplished by myself." He was going to open the subject up by keeping the most important "intricacies" back, at the same time putting his competitors out of a job.

The natural outcome of true competitive spirit is innovation and it is on that front that Houdini launched his greatest forays. In 1912, he sought German patents for a watertight chest on four legs which would be locked and then lowered into a larger chest which would be locked and filled with water. The performer would thus be islanded, dry, inside the smaller chest, but surrounded on all sides by the water in the outer box. Houdini's design allowed him to escape from both boxes without damaging the locks and without becoming wet. He also applied for a patent on a "theatrical deepfreeze", a device by which he could be frozen inside a block of ice yet walk away leaving the block whole - a miracle he would try to perfect his entire life.

Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric for twenty years, is a man who knows about competitive spirit and innovation. The genesis for what later became GE Capital was a proposal to buy \$1.1 billion of auto loans in Thailand from a group of failed companies that had been seized by the government. Understanding that the country was in the worst recession in its history, Welch saw it as the "wackiest idea I had seen in my 20 years on the board." Nevertheless, after witnessing executive Mark Norbom's passion on the subject, he grew to see it as a "wild but innovative" possibility. The deal was funded, others followed, and in 2000 GE Capital made \$5.2 billion, 41% of GE's total income, on more than \$370 billion in assets.

Houdini's Secret #5, PURITY OF MOTIVE

Midway through his career Houdini devised an escape from a mental hospital where attendants rolled him in sheets with only his head uncovered and chained him to the metal frame of a hospital bed. The orderlies then poured twenty buckets of hot water over him, dousing the sheets so they would shrink and tighten. This was done outside his cabinet, the box that conventionally hid his efforts, so the audience could see what his biographer describes as the "muscle-wrenching turning and squirming to loosen the skintight sheets. It was like watching a man trying to wriggle out of his own skin." Indeed, this may be the essential truth about Houdini. In many ways, he was a man trying to wriggle out of his own skin. But why? The answer has to do with purity of motive.

Throughout his career, audiences and credible skeptics like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle attempted to attribute supernatural powers to Houdini. Yet, it was he who insisted his tricks were "entertainments" which any human could accomplish "with the proper skills and training." This modesty from one who was among the



greatest self-promoters reveals the sanctity with which he viewed both his art and his audience. It was a “trick” to gain an audience’s confidence, hoodwink them, and then explain that they had been tricked. This was “mystification”. Far different were the Davenport brothers, or the clairvoyant Margery, who took money from vulnerable mourners seeking to contact deceased loved ones. To Houdini this was an outrage. It defied his sense of morality, the purity of motive that caused the world to admire him and Houdini to live with himself.

There is no question that Houdini, “were it not for my upbringing”, could have become a master criminal. Certainly, there were few bank vaults that could keep him out, nor prisons that could hold him. Yet, he shunned the possibility of a life of crime having little interest in money, but an obsession with gaining knowledge. “I am not a magician,” he insisted to *Who’s Who* in 1924, “but a mystifier, author, and inventor.” Like Icarus, the figure in Greek mythology, Houdini wanted to shed his earthly shackles, leave his body behind, and soar. His ambition was noble and so ennobled and inspired those thoroughly grounded whether by society, the corporate structures of the day or their own lack of imagination.

Says Lou Gerstner, CEO of IBM, “Integrity has got to be the foundation of every successful manager. Establishing it and never wavering from it supports everything you do in good times or bad. A success-

ful manager should never have two agendas only one, straight and honest. People may not always agree with you, but they know that they are getting it straight from the shoulder. Integrity has helped me to build relationships with customers, suppliers, competitors and governments. I would never allow there to be any question that what I said or did was for anything but moving the corporation and its employees forward into the future.” The corporate manager will make errors in judgement, timing and choice during metamorphosis. Still, if one abides by Houdini’s secrets he will be correct at least 70% of the time, the minimum percentage necessary to justify action and the expectation of success. It is to cover the other 30% that a covenant based upon credibility and good will must be established between the corporate manager and his superiors, peers and subordinates. People must trust in you, if not always in your decisions. Ultimately, trust based on purity of motive is the glue that holds careers and corporations together.

Is it heroic just to be able to escape? Little, it seems, has changed from Houdini’s time to our own. In business, as in life, it requires a full set of carefully honed skills to escape “boxes”, corporate or otherwise. Still, without professional integrity the elements leading to our greatest triumphs become crass and unsatisfying if they are not used to push forward those who depend on the corporate manager for success and wisdom. For, in the end, there is something absurd, even terrifying, about the fact that what there is to escape from is often actually, and ingeniously, a “box” constructed by ourselves. ●

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