

The Dilbert Principle, by Scott Adams

Reviewed by Suzanne S. Barnhill

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[*Hold up Dilbert drawing.*] How many of you know who this is? [*A few hands.*] Do you read the “Dilbert” strip in the newspaper? [*One or two nods.*] Even if you don’t read “Dilbert” regularly, you probably recognize the character, because Dilbert has become the poster child for our national economic malaise. Even if you don’t pay much attention to business news, you have to be aware that big corporations are changing in ways that may improve the bottom line but severely reduce the quality of work life for employees—if they even continue to *be* employees. When a major employer like Sunbeam lays off half its personnel, there are bound to be some unhappy people, and, as David Van Biema wrote in *Time* magazine, “Every calamity has its bard, and downsizing’s is Scott Adams.” A *People* magazine profile of Adams speaks of “disgruntled employees who have made Dilbert their ’90s-style symbol of passive resistance” and quotes a senior manager at Global Network Navigator, Inc., as saying that Adam’s “inside knowledge of the indignities suffered by workers has made him ‘an institution in Silicon Valley.’”

So Dilbert is everywhere. When I bought this book, “Dilbert” items had started showing up in catalogs, and I had been reading the strip in the weekend papers, but this was before the *Press Register* merged all its comics into both papers, so I really wasn’t very familiar with the characters and theme of “Dilbert.”

Add to that the fact that I’m not much of a book buyer. I read close to 100 books a year, but I very rarely buy one. That’s what libraries are for, and Betty can tell you that I’m one of her best customers. I usually succumb to a few books at the Friends of the Library book sale, no matter how hard I try to resist, and I like to buy books as gifts, and I do buy reference books, especially about computers, but I almost never buy a book just to read. So why did I pay \$22 for this one?

Well, I read this Jay Grelen column [*hold up*]. In it, Jay wrote about Suzanne Oaks, who graduated from Julius T. Wright School in Mobile in 1987, went on to graduate from Harvard, and is now an editor for HarperCollins. And she is the person who read an article Scott Adams had written for the *Wall Street Journal*, convinced him it could be expanded into a book, and then edited it. So right away you have several things that make the book intriguing: the editor’s first name is the same as mine, and she’s a local girl. Moreover, she’s a Harvard graduate, and, as most of you know, I have a daughter at Harvard. Jay’s description also made the book sound pretty interesting.

But perhaps the primary reason was a more serious one. As some of you know, my business is editing and typing. And a major part of my work is on business management textbooks. So I figured reading this book would be good background for my work—and I could deduct it as a business expense!

And in fact this book, like Adams's "Dilbert" strips, is not merely humorous. It has a serious message about what's wrong with business today, especially in big corporations, and how they can be improved. Adams's ability to tune in to and understand what cubicle dwellers in today's companies are going through is what has made him such a success. "No matter how absurd I try to make the comic strip," he writes, "I can't stay ahead of what people are experiencing in their own workplaces." For this reason, he says, he'll never run out of material.

Before I tell you more about the book, let me give you a little background on Scott Adams himself. He was 39 years old in June and lives in California. He grew up in Windham, New York, near Albany, the second child of Virginia Adams, a homemaker and assembly-line worker, and her husband Paul, a postal clerk, and he knew from childhood that he wanted to be a cartoonist. His mother told him he could be anything. "She said I could be President. I wanted to be Charles Schulz."

But the road to success as a cartoonist was a rocky one. He was rejected by the Famous Artists School at 11 (you had to be 12 to get in) and got the lowest grade in the class in the one drawing course he took at Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York. He had cartoons rejected by *Playboy*, *The New Yorker*, and a long list of syndicators. Resigning himself to making a living some other way, he chose economics as his college major. "I figured that if you worked hard and you were smart, you could get promoted," he says. "It wasn't until I was well into it [that] I realized that you also had to be tall and have good hair." If you've seen pictures of him you know he's only 5'8" tall, with what *Newsweek* calls "a visibly endangered blond mane." Even his girlfriend says he looks like an accountant.

Somehow he ended up in California, where he took a job as a bank teller and was twice robbed at gunpoint. He also worked as a commercial lender and computer programmer and got his MBA at Berkeley. In 1986 he was hired as an applications engineer at the Pacific Bell Telephone Company (PacBell) in San Ramon, California, where he occupied cubicle 4S700R. This is where Dilbert was born. Although he was making \$70,000 a year, a lot of his work was the sort of pointless, fad-driven nonsense that he now lampoons. "In my 17-year experience," he says, "I never once did anything that helped a customer."

So, in spare moments between doing whatever it is that an applications engineer does, Adams doodled. Dilbert, he says, was a composite of his co-workers. "They all had little potato-shaped bodies, and they had glasses," he says. At first his character was nameless; it was christened Dilbert at a name-the-nerd office contest. It wasn't until 1989 that "Dilbert" was adopted by United Media, which also syndicates *Peanuts*.

There is an interesting story behind Adams's success, too. Instead of whining, sulking, or accepting cubicle doom, he affirmed. Affirmed? Yes. He explains it this way: "The basic idea is that 15 times a day, you just write down whatever it is your goal is. Then you'll observe things happening that will make that objective more likely to happen. It's actually a process of forcing your environment to change." This sounds like the very sort of jargon he derides, so even Adams was skeptical at first. His initial results—impressing a certain woman, success in picking likely stocks—were not definitive, so he tried being more specific. He was about to take the GMAT test (to get into business school), so he asked for the precise score of 94. When he got the results back, his score was...94. Affirming seemed to work.

So he started writing “I will become a syndicated cartoonist” 15 times a day. Before long his package of cartoons had been accepted by United Media. His new affirmation was “I will be the best cartoonist on the planet.” He decided to measure success in terms of book sales, but Gary Larson (“The Far Side”) and Bill Watterson (“Calvin and Hobbes”) were the rulers of that kingdom, so, he says, “I actually consciously thought, ‘I need those two guys to leave.’ I started thinking very consciously, and probably every day, that I just really wanted them to retire. And they did.”

But affirming is not the whole secret. For one thing, as *Newsweek* put it, “Scott Adams is a very funny guy who writes a brilliantly perceptive comic strip.” And he had learned a few things in B-school, too. One of these was marketing, giving the customers what they wanted. A year after he got his syndication contract, his strip appeared in only 100 newspapers. In the beginning, the strip had been more general, mixing themes of Dilbert’s hopeless dating life and Dogbert’s periodic attempts to conquer the world with work-related subjects. But the business-oriented strips were the ones that were catching on, being cut out and tacked up on cubicle walls. So he switched the emphasis to 80 percent business and technology, and that’s when the strip really caught on.

In 1993, he persuaded United Media to let him put his e-mail address on the strip, and this provided the feedback he needed. Eventually “Dilbert” outgrew Adams’s spare time. He had a standing agreement with PacBell that he would resign whenever the public-relations value of having him no longer paid his way. After the publication of his “Dilbert Principle” article in *The Wall Street Journal*, his boss took him up on it. Even though he is no longer a cubicle dweller, his inside knowledge of work life still stands him in good stead, and in any case, 80 percent of his material comes from readers. “I could probably lock my door and never see another human,” he says, “as long as I had my cats and computer.”

Although his girlfriend, Pam Okasaki, with whom he shares a house in Dublin, California, might object to being omitted from this short list, Adams’s computer is certainly a major factor in what might be called the “Dilbert Phenomenon.” Adams gets, depending on your source, 200 or 300 or 800 or 1,000 e-mail messages a day, and his Web site, The Dilbert Zone, reportedly receives 1.6 million hits a day. It is Adams’s responsiveness to communications from the trenches that has made “Dilbert” the fastest-growing strip in the country, running in over 1,000 newspapers and read by some 60 million people. Adams has sold more than a million books (over 750,000 of *The Dilbert Principle* alone) and recently published another book, *Dogbert’s Top Secret Management Handbook*. In addition, several corporate newsletters, including one published by Pacific Telesis Group, his former employer, use reprint strips. Licensing for “Dilbert” items—calendars, stuffed toys, mugs, and so on—is in its infancy but is expected to make him a millionaire. Meanwhile, the daily comic strip that started it all is so ubiquitous that Scott Cullen, editor of *OfficeSystems* magazine, recently wrote: “I went to an office furniture show earlier this year and was wondering what was so strange about all the new panel systems on display. Then it hit me. They didn’t have a Dilbert comic strip tacked to them.”

The overwhelming success of the strip is due to its fundamental truth. As Adams says in his Introduction:

Most of the themes of my comic strip “Dilbert” involve workplace situations. I routinely include bizarre and unworldly elements such as sadistic talking animals, troll-like accountants, and employees turning into dishrags after the life-force has been drained from their bodies. And yet the comment I hear most often is:

“That’s just like my company.”

Guy Kawasaki of Apple Computer says, “There are only two kinds of companies, those that recognize they’re just like ‘Dilbert’ and those that are also like ‘Dilbert’ but don’t know it yet.” And this is undoubtedly the secret of Dilbert’s success with managers as well as subordinates. As Adams himself says, “Everybody thinks it’s making fun of somebody else.”

Given the popularity of the comic strip, it is not surprising that *The Dilbert Principle* is a success. Published in April, it had hit the top of the *Business Week* best seller list by the end of May and soon topped the *New York Times* list as well. By late July, when I bought it, it was already in its eighteenth printing. Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, director of Emory University’s CEO College, said it “is being talked about more than any single management book right now.” Adams is much in demand as a speaker. He recently spoke to a group of executives at a company he won’t identify where all 80 participants already had the book—a gift from their CEO. Mike Hammer, author of *Reengineering the Corporation* and *Beyond Reengineering*, says, “There’s more truth in one volume of Dilbert than there is in 10 volumes of Harvard Business School case studies....It’s not a comic strip, it’s a documentary—it provides the best window into the reality of corporate life that I’ve ever seen.”

So what *is* the Dilbert Principle? Simply stated, it is that “the most ineffective workers are systematically moved to the place where they can do the least damage: management.” In his Introduction, titled “Why Is Business So Absurd?” Adams cites a few real-world examples of absurdity:

- A major technology company simultaneously rolled out two new programs: (1) a random drug testing program, and (2) an “Individual Dignity Enhancement” program.
- A company purchased laptop computers for employees to use while traveling. Fearing they might be stolen, the managers came up with a clever solution: permanently attach the laptop computers to the employees’ desks.

After several more such examples, he continues:

Thousands of people have told me workplace stories (mostly through e-mail) that are even more absurd than the examples above. When I first started hearing these stories I was puzzled, but after careful analysis I have developed a sophisticated theory to explain the existence of this bizarre workplace behavior: People are idiots.

Including me. Everyone is an idiot, not just the people with low SAT scores. The only difference among us is that we're idiots about different things at different times. No matter how smart you are, you spend much of your day being an idiot. That's the central premise of this scholarly work.

Under the subhead, "Mandatory Self-Deprecation," he gives an example of his own idiocy:

I proudly include myself in the idiot category. Idiocy in the modern age isn't an all-encompassing, twenty-four-hour situation for most people. It's a condition that everybody slips into many times a day. Life is just too complicated to be smart all the time.

The other day I brought my pager to the repair center because it wouldn't work after I changed the battery. The repairman took the pager out of my hand, flipped open the battery door, turned the battery around, and handed the now functional pager back to me in one well-practiced motion. This took much of the joy out of my righteous indignation over the quality of their product. But the repairman seemed quite amused. And so did every other customer in the lobby.

On that day, in that situation, I was a complete idiot. Yet somehow I managed to operate a motor vehicle to the repair shop and back. It is a wondrous human characteristic to be able to slip into and out of idiocy many times a day without noticing the change or accidentally killing innocent bystanders in the process.

As you can judge from this passage, this book, while it deals with a serious subject, is far from serious in style. As you might expect, Adams sounds more like Dave Barry than Tom Peters and Bob Waterman [authors of *In Search of Excellence*]. The book is heavily larded with "Dilbert" strips as illustrations (some more apt than others) and quotes many, many e-mail messages, all from the same person: "(name withheld)."

To give you another sample of Adams's style, I'll quote from the first chapter, "The Dilbert Principle," which contains the text of the original *Wall Street Journal* article. After citing several more examples of corporate idiocy, Adams writes:

Stories like these prompted me to do the first annual Dilbert Survey to find out what management practices were most annoying to employees. The choices included the usual suspects: Quality, Empowerment, Reengineering, and the like. But the number-one vote-getter in this highly unscientific survey was "Idiots Promoted to Management."

This seemed like a subtle change from the old concept by which capable workers were promoted until they reached their level of incompetence—best described as the "Peter Principle." Now, apparently, the incompetent workers are promoted directly to management without ever passing through the temporary competence stage.

When I entered the workforce in 1979, the Peter Principle described management pretty well. Now I think we'd all like to return to those Golden Years when you had a boss who was once good at something.

I get all nostalgic when I think about it. Back then, we all had hopes of being promoted beyond our levels of competence. Every worker had a shot at someday personally navigating the company into the tar pits while reaping large bonuses and stock options. It was a time when inflation meant everybody got an annual raise; a time when we freely admitted that the customers didn't matter. It was a time of joy.

We didn't appreciate it then, but the much underrated Peter Principle always provided us with a boss who understood what we did for a living. Granted, he made consistently bad decisions—after all, he had no management skills. But at least they were the informed decisions of a seasoned veteran from the trenches.

Example

Boss: “When I had your job I could drive a three-inch rod through a metal casing with one motion. If you're late again I'll do the same thing to your head.”

Nitpickers found lots of problems with the Peter Principle, but on the whole it worked. Lately, however, the Peter Principle has given way to the “Dilbert Principle.” The basic concept of the Dilbert Principle is that the most ineffective workers are systematically moved to the place where they can do the least damage: management.

This has not proved to be the winning strategy that you might think.

“Maybe we should learn something from nature,” Adams says, alluding to the principle of survival of the fittest.

It seems as if we've turned nature's rules upside down. We systematically identify and promote the people who have the least skills. The usual business rationalization for promoting idiots (the Dilbert Principle in a nutshell) is something along the lines of “Well, he can't write code, he can't design a network, and he doesn't have any sales skill. But he has *very* good hair...”

In the following 24 chapters, Adams describes all the management practices that make life so unbearable for today's workers. One chapter is devoted to the “Great Lies of Management,” which include “Employees are our most valuable asset,” “I have an open-door policy,” “We're reorganizing to better serve our customers,” “We reward risk-takers,” and “Your input is important to us.”

Two of the chapters I enjoyed most were those on “Business Communication” and “Management Consultants.” Because I edit books written by management consultants who consider themselves experts in business communication, the jargon of Mission Statements and Organization Development is very familiar to me. Adams describes a consultant as “a person who takes your money and annoys your employees while tirelessly searching for the best way to extend the consulting contract,” adding that “consultants will ultimately recommend that you do whatever you're *not* doing now. Centralize whatever is decentralized. Flatten whatever is vertical. Diversify whatever is concentrated and divest everything that is not 'core' to the business. You'll hardly ever find a consultant who recommends that you keep everything the

same and stop wasting money on consultants. And consultants will rarely deal with the root cause of your company's problems, since that's probably the person who hired them. Instead, they'll look for ways to improve the 'strategy' and the 'process.'"

Last spring I had the dubious pleasure of producing almost single-handedly the Study Guide to accompany a supervisory management textbook [*hold up*]. Partly because I had *not* taken on the job of editing and typing the textbook itself, it was running far behind schedule, and so, in addition to co-authoring, editing, and typing the Study Guide, I was also hired to typeset it because there wasn't time to send it out to another production house. Since I'm hopeless at proofreading my own work, I hired my daughter, Virginia (the one who's at Harvard), to proofread it for me. She did a bang-up job and grudgingly admitted that in the process she'd learned something about management—or at least been exposed to a lot of the current buzzwords: empowerment, team building, participative management, downsizing, transformational leadership, Total Quality Management, and so on. When I was reading this book and occasionally quoted some of the more outrageous examples of jargon, she commented that the scary thing was that she actually knew what I was talking about!

Here's a sample from Adam's e-mail:

My boss had these in my performance planning for 1995. (Really!) I just got them today.

"Utilize clarification processes."

"Make sure appropriate people are involved in the process."

"Visibly act or function as a team player."

"Act in the best interests of achieving the team."

These are the ones I came up with. I think mine are better.

"Streamline processes for maximizing propensities."

"Enable full contrivances of empowerment."

"Eliminate occurrences of proliferate randomness."

"Managerially balance data compilation with process ownership."

Here's another:

The following is an excerpt from an announcement memo from one of our general managers concerning a personnel change.

"This change will allow us to better leverage our talent base in an area where developmental roles are under way and strategically focuses us toward the upcoming Business System transition where Systems literacy and accuracy will be essential to maintain and to further improve service levels to our customer base going forward."

Several of us sat down and tried to understand what was supposed to be communicated and came up with the following by just crossing out most of the double-talk:

“This change will improve service to our customers.”

Adams quotes another example in his original “Dilbert Principle” article:

The Business Services Leadership Team will enhance the organization in order to continue on the journey toward a Market Facing Organization (MFO) model. To that end, we are consolidating the Object Management for Business Services into a cross strata team.

As long as companies continue to perpetrate this kind of “communication,” it will be easy to make fun of them. And many modern organizational trends, viewed from the outside, seem pretty screwy. The whole concept of cubicles, to those who have never worked in them, seems inhumane, but even having a cubicle to call your own seems preferable to the modern practice of “hoteling,” where each employee has a work space but not necessarily the same work space every day. For sales and service reps working mostly out of their homes and cars, this is probably not unreasonable, but it *sounds* absurd.

Adams begins his book with the admission that the content is thin:

These days [he writes] it seems like any idiot with a laptop computer can churn out a business book and make a few bucks. That’s certainly what I’m hoping. It would be a real letdown if the trend changed before this masterpiece goes to print.

As some of you may know, my main profession is cartooning. It’s a challenge for a cartoonist to write a whole book. Cartoonists are trained to be brief. Everything I’ve learned in my entire life can be boiled down to a dozen bullet points, several of which I’ve already forgotten.

You’d feel kinda perturbed if you bought a thick book and all it had in it was a dozen bullet points, particularly if several of them seemed to be “filler.” So my “plan for excellence” is to repeat myself often to take up some page space. In marketing terms, this is called “adding value.” And for your reading pleasure I will include many colorful but unnecessary metaphors. In fact, the metaphors in this book are more useless than a weasel in a cardboard shirt.

A footnote to the last sentence says, “I can’t promise that the rest will be that good.”

As you may have figured out by now, most of this book is pretty silly. After all, no one expects serious business solutions from a humble cartoonist. But Adams does propound a solution of sorts in the final chapter, “New Company Model: OA5.” He begins with this caveat:

In this chapter you will find a variety of untested suggestions from an author who has never successfully managed anything but his cats. (And now that I think of it, I haven’t seen the gray one for two days.)

Some people think that because I cleverly mock current management methods I must have some excellent ideas that I am selfishly keeping to myself. Over time, I have begun to believe this myself. (If this doesn’t prove my central thesis—that we’re all idiots—then nothing will.)

I doubt that anything you read here will improve your life, but I'm fairly confident that it won't hurt you either, and that's better than a lot of the things you're doing now.

If any of you are gullible enough to take my recommendations, don't say you weren't warned. That said, I think you'll find some interesting ideas here.

The first "interesting idea" is the necessity of focusing on *fundamentals*. Adams's "grand insight" about company fundamentals is that "Companies with effective employees and good products usually do well." This may seem obvious, he says, but "look around your company and see how many activities are at least one level removed from something that improves either the effectiveness of the people or the quality of the product." By "product," he adds, he means "the entire product experience from the customer's perspective, including the delivery, image, and channel." Although it's hard to define what's "one level removed," he offers examples:

- If you're writing code for a new software release, that's fundamental, because you're improving the product. But if you're creating a policy about writing software then you're one level removed.
- If you're testing a better way to assemble a product, that's fundamental. But if you're working on a task force to develop a suggestion system then you're one level removed.

And so on. Focusing on fundamentals will make a lot of the frills unnecessary:

A company with a good product rarely needs a Mission Statement. Effective employees will suggest improvements without being on a Quality Team. Nobody will miss the Employee Recognition Committee if the managers are effective and routinely recognize good performance. The budget process will suddenly look very simple if you're making money (by focusing on your products).

Adams then describes his "conceptual model for a perfect company."

The primary objective of this company is to make the employees as effective as possible. I figure the best products usually come from the most effective employees, so employee effectiveness is the most fundamental of the fundamentals.

The goal of my hypothetical company is to get the best work out of the employees and make sure they leave work by five o'clock. Finishing by five o'clock is so central to everything that follows that I named the company [model] OA5 (Out at Five) to reinforce the point.

The idea behind the OA5 model is that "happy employees are more productive and creative than unhappy ones," but "there's a limit to how much happiness you can get while you're at work." If companies let employees compress their activities to fit a reduced work period, their energy and interest will be increased, and they will be more creative.

The trick for managers, then, is to "stay out of the way." This hands-off policy includes letting employees "dress any way they want, decorate their work spaces any way they want,

format memos any way they want. Nobody has ever demonstrated that these areas have an impact on productivity.” It is clear from these suggestions that Adams is still addressing the situation of cubicle dwellers, since dress codes obviously cannot be abandoned for some employees who have to meet the public.

Adams makes several suggestions about how to be an OA5 manager. One of them is to teach employees how to be efficient: keeping meetings short, eliminating low-priority activities, and so on. His conclusion, under the subhead “The Big Finish,” is as follows:

A culture of efficiency starts with the everyday things that you can directly control: clothes, meeting lengths, conversations with co-workers, and the like. The way you approach these everyday activities establishes the culture that will drive your fundamental activities.

What message does a company send when it huddles its managers together for several days to produce a Mission Statement that sounds something like this:

“We design integrated world-class solutions on a worldwide basis.”

Answer: It sends a message that the managers can’t write, can’t think, and can’t identify priorities.

Managers are obsessed with the “big picture.” They look for the big picture in Vision Statements and Mission Statements and Quality Programs. I think the big picture is hiding in the details. It’s in the clothes, the office supplies, the casual comments, and the coffee. I’m all for working on the big picture, if you know where to find it.

Finally—and this is the last time I’m going to say it—we’re all idiots and we’re going to make mistakes. That’s not necessarily bad. I have a saying: “Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”

Keep your people fresh, happy, and efficient. Set a target, then get out of the way. Let art happen. Sometimes idiots can accomplish wonderful things.

My conclusion is that Scott Adams may be an idiot, but *The Dilbert Principle* is a wonderful thing.

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