College of Business book Review by Paul Johnson

Title: "Wrong: Why experts\* keep failing us--and how to know when not to trust them"

Author: David H. Freedman

Publisher: Little, Brown and Company

Length: 304 pages

Price: $25.99 (hardback)

Reading time: 5 hours

Reading rating: 9 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

This review is a lie.

Or at least possibly incorrect according to David Freedman in his book "Wrong: Why experts\* keep failing us--and how to know when not to trust them". Freedman weaves a compelling discussion about the credence we give to experts in all aspects of our lives. Some business people rely heavily on expert advice derived from consultants and business specialists, which makes this book particularly relevant for the business community. However, the target market for this book goes beyond the businessperson to include anyone who uses expert analysis when making decisions. If your investment portfolio is struggling after some less than effective advice or you own a lemon for a car after reading a glowing review online, this book might be for you.

The book begins with a discussion of what we define as an expert and the cognitive biases that such experts face. A significant problem that advice seekers possess is the plethora of individuals professing to be experts. While anyone able to design a business card can become a self-proclaimed expert, Freedman discusses the traits associated with a “good” expert: independent, data driven, competent and absent of an agenda. Despite this short list of identifiable characteristics however, finding effective advice can still be problematic because of individual cognitive biases and irrationality. Even well trained scientists with pure motives are subject to the whims and chaos of the human mind.

Freedman continues by outlining some of the problems that experts may have when interpreting information and data when giving advice. Included in these problems is the intentional distortion of advice to fit pre-conceived agendas as well as the unintentional distortion associated with boundedly rational decision making.

Another fascinating part of this book was the discussion about what we want as consumers of expert advice. Clear, broad, and actionable information tends to be preferred over muddled, narrow, and merely explanatory. Being told that all I need to do to be healthy is drink red wine is more appealing expert advice than being told that good health is complicated and includes both environmental and genetic causes. Freedman also implicates the role of media in propagating such simplistic advice as sound bites without any serious journalistic investigation.

In the end, “Wrong” develops a short list of cognitive tools useable by the reader to delineate trustworthy expert advice from the untrustworthy. Freedman suggests that untrustworthy advice falls into patterns of promotion and description. Identification of such patterns should throw up a red flag, which hopefully will motivate you to a closer look at the expert advice you receive. I also enjoyed the appendix in the book discussing whether you should even believe Freedman’s expert opinions about experts.

My only complaint about the book stems from what I perceived as a lack of depth in the discussion and probably says more about me than the book itself. I wanted to know more about the psychological and cognitive basis for how experts are wrong. That much detail is probably not needed for a popular press book, but it still left me wanting more.

Overall, “Wrong” is an easy read and illustrates some of the fascinating biases introduced by experts into business and society. I recommend this book because it effectively portrays the problems associated with a heavy reliance on experts as well as a few simple rules to help the reader delineate between good and bad expert advice. You shouldn’t listen to me though, I could be wrong.

Paul is a professor of management in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His interests include organizational behavior, leadership, and motivation processes. For previously reviewed books, visit us at our website at www.wcu.edu/cob/.