



Confessions of An Accidental Businessman

It Takes a Lifetime to Find Wisdom

by James A. Autry

Berrett-Koehler, 1996

252 pages

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Take-Aways

- James A. Autry began his career as a copy boy with the Associated Press.
- He worked his way up to president of Meredith Corp.'s Magazine Group.
- He was not born to privilege, which he thinks helped make him a better manager.
- The problem with most business biographies is that they see one's personal life as separate from one's business ideas or behavior.
- Autry believes that human connections are of utmost importance in business.
- He tells his story to show how it looks and feels to strive for a good business life.
- He found that there was no relationship between books and lectures about management and what managers actually did.
- To be a good team leader you must tend to the needs of the individuals on the team.
- Autry defines a leader as someone who can unleash the power of the human spirit.
- The most important thing a manager can do is help employees find meaning in their work.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
7	6	7	9

Review

Confessions of an Accidental Businessman

Rarely does a book live up to the glowing blurbs on its front and back covers. This one does. James A. Autry, former president of Meredith Corp.'s Magazine Group (home of *Better Homes & Gardens*, among others) has written a searingly honest, heartfelt, often amusing autobiography with plenty of insights into the business of journalism, business in general, corporate culture and what it takes to be a manager and a leader. Between chapters, Autry includes many of his poems (he's had two poetry books published). Many chapters include management advice from the wisdom that he's accumulated. His counsel rises above most of what you read in popular management and how-to books, and his writing style is lively, as one would expect from a former journalist and editor. *getAbstract* recommends this book to readers in all business areas and to anyone who wants an inside glimpse of the magazine industry, or of the real workings of high-level management.

Abstract

From Newspaper Boy to Corporate Executive

James A. Autry was not born to privilege — his father left the family when Autry was only six and his mother struggled through a series of low-paying clerical jobs, among the few opportunities for women at the time. As a result of this background, he found it unsettling to go from hands-on reporting and editing to a life filled with the luxurious perks offered only to highly paid corporate executives. He came to learn that most corporate executives aren't as impressive as you might expect. They're just regular people who are as vulnerable and flawed as anyone else. "In other words, they are human, but this is not the story we usually hear."

Autry believes that business biographies and memoirs often treat business as a completely separate part of life, which "amply illustrates the problem with business." People in business are taught to believe that they must keep business and life separate. But, the story of a businessperson's life can't be limited to a series of accomplishments on a resume.

If telling success stories is the only way to examine the lessons of a life, he says, few lessons will be taught. This is important, since teaching lessons is at the heart of meaningful storytelling. People in business must remember that all of their experiences — personal and professional — are connected. Your life's themes and memories will influence your business journey. From the mundane to the dramatic, events in an executive's life can bring about significant changes (many for the better, some not) in the workplace. Autry has learned that "a supportive environment fulfills (the) powerful business purposes of finding and keeping good people and making them more productive." Good leadership, he says, isn't about doing; it's about being.

Human Connections

In telling his story, Autry focuses on overcoming barriers and learning the best way to be in life and in business. Autry's family struggles during his childhood are still power-

"If, as a manager, you have not had the opportunity to lift the burden of nit-picking bureaucratic policies and procedures off the backs of good people and then stand back and watch them work, you have missed one of the most inspiring management experiences of all."

"Journalism is by definition, commerce. It is not art, it is not public service, it is commerce."

“One of the most widely held misconceptions about businesspeople, particularly men, is that they play golf to have fun. Fun is rarely on the agenda of a business golf outing. Mostly it is about contacts and selling and politicking and maneuvering.”

“Business doesn’t prepare us for the presence of death in the office. The business schools don’t teach anything about it, about what the manager says when someone says, ‘I have cancer,’ or about what to say to the other employees who will have to spend days and days with this constant reminder of their own mortality.”

“The writer’s job is to dig so deep into his own story that he reaches everyone’s story.” [William Stafford]

ful memories, and he believes they helped him be more careful as a boss “who had great influence over people’s incomes, their futures, their ability to achieve their dreams.” He hopes readers will embrace these ideas since they involve the human connection corporate culture often lacks:

- 1) His story shows “how it can look and feel to strive toward a good business life.”
- 2) Managers must recognize that they already know fundamentally how to be managers since that knowledge comes from deep within themselves, not from any formal business education. Managers must then manage from that true self, even if it sometimes is in conflict with “the way things are done” at their workplace.
- 3) Managers should think of their organization as a community of work and should support their employees in thinking of it in that way too, and in participating in it.
- 4) Overcome any discomfort about the notion of spirit in the workplace. Something binds people in a common endeavor, “a spirit of work” that can be very powerful if nurtured.
- 5) Everyone makes mistakes but you don’t have to be defined by them. With courage you can learn and grow from your mistakes instead.
- 6) Pay attention to all of life’s experiences, particularly your relationships. Recognize and examine how they’re all connected. Look inside yourself to be the best you can be, no matter where you are and what you are doing.

Intrapreneuring

After working as a newspaper boy, Autry became a copyboy at the Associated Press in the late 1940s while in high school in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1951, he entered college to study journalism and worked on the student paper as “a crusading reporter and editor.” He wanted a job on a big metropolitan daily newspaper, and he harbored every reporter’s dream — a Pulitzer Prize. Being a businessman never entered his mind.

After four years flying U.S. Air Force jet fighters, he could only find one journalism job: as editor of the weekly paper in Humboldt, Tennessee. “And I was expected to sell office supplies in the front office, help set type and make up the forms for the old flatbed press, and God, help me — sell advertising to the local merchants.” He learned his first business lesson: Local advertisers didn’t like crusading journalism — they only wanted positive, local stories. “By their definition, the paper was to be a positive community booster, not a detractor.”

He was “rescued” from that job in 1960, when he was offered a position as copy editor at *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine in Des Moines, Iowa. Though he held the lowest editorial position, he nonetheless felt totally unqualified to work for a magazine. He was too scared to ask his superiors or co-workers for help, so he began a process of self-education, studying to give himself “the equivalent of an advanced degree in magazine journalism.”

Two years later, he was promoted to his first management position — Managing Editor — and he felt just as unqualified for this position as he had for his last one. Again, he began a self-education process, this time about management, but he found no apparent “relationship between the books and lectures and what the managers actually did.”

He resigned as Managing Editor in 1966 to take an opportunity back in “grassroots jour-

“These understandings or realizations or moments of truth prescribed for me a path that was quite different from the one most often used in business, particularly by senior corporate executives.”

“Most of the time the real legends are those lower in an organization doing their jobs, not expecting to lead the company, and expecting no special recognition. In fact, it’s not rare for an everyday legend to refuse recognition.”

“Maybe it is that devotion to learning and doing that makes all the difference, that distinguishes the heroes, the everyday legends, from the rest of us.”

nalism:” the position of editor and publisher of *New Orleans Magazine*. Ironically, that turned out to be more like running a small retail business than practicing journalism, but it taught him “the hard way a great deal about business fundamentals.” He returned to Meredith Corp. as Editorial Director of Special Interest Publications, where he headed a group of editors and designers who produced several specialized publications. This proved to be one of his most rewarding, instructive management experiences because his mission was to increase the number of special publications and to explore other publishing business opportunities.

He learned that journalism was just a business, not an art or a form of public service. Initially this shocked him, but soon he realized that it had to be a business because fundamentally, it was selling something. In his new position, he learned about “intrapreneuring” — launching an enterprise from within a company. He set some goals, took away some ridiculous bureaucratic constraints, provided some rewards and got out of the way so his employees could thrive and create. “Now we call it ‘empowerment,’ but then I thought of it as taking off the harnesses and letting them run,” he says. Within 18 months, the division went from six publications to 18; and it started a whole new group of publications that became a major profit center for Meredith Corp. The job was fun, but he didn’t think it took any particular managerial skill. Although he worked hard, he was still surprised every time he was promoted. He became the chief editorial person at Meredith and then president of its Magazine Group. In 1992, he took early retirement to write, consult and lecture.

Real Management

Looking back on his career, and observing the careers of other managers, he says he understands the overall lesson: “We frequently underestimate ourselves, we frequently know more than we think we do, and our instincts and judgment are more reliable than we think.”

Autry defines a leader as a manager who can unleash the power of the human spirit by using the organization’s rules, policies and procedures to enable people rather than restrict them. This is at the heart of “Real Management.” To be a good team leader, he says, don’t focus so much on the needs of the team that you ignore or injure the individuals on the team.

A boss once told him to talk to one of his fellow employees about the man’s habit of wearing argyle socks instead of over-the-calf dark socks. This was one of the most embarrassing conversations Autry ever had as a new manager, and his argyle-sock-wearing colleague never forgot it. More than 25 years later when Autry retired, the guy gave him a pair of argyle socks. That sock “problem” occurred in the 1960s, “a time when employees were expected to suspend their own personal and family needs for the good of the company, and careers often depended on willingness to move anywhere, anytime and back again,” Autry notes. At the time, people joked that IBM stood for “I been moved.”

Autry learned how to be a manager by learning how not to be one. Nobody could tell him what management actually was, except for the classic definition: “Getting results through people.” As happens to many executives, his first big promotion put him in the position of managing his friends. He felt conflicted: Was he a manager or a friend? How could he successfully be both? His management style at the time veered between

“I came to understand that fun and good times can be a powerful management tool. I realized that the point was not escape but celebration. We not only need dignity and meaning from our work; we need celebration.

“Though all perks have some ego-boosting element built into them, I am very opposed to the ones that do nothing but boost ego.”

“authoritative and pleading,” but he ultimately settled into a simple formula that worked for a long time: “Be sure people were clear about what we were going to do and what we were trying to accomplish, then identify the people who were having trouble and try to help them.”

Autry learned that in real management:

- There’s a difference between authority and power.
- “Humor beats a bitchy memo every time.”
- Salary increases — or the lack of them — are “arbitrary as hell.”
- The feminists were right about men having “testosterone poisoning.”
- Business ethics often have strange definitions.
- Business needs rituals for dealing with illness and death among employees.
- “The price of accomplishment is that you are asked to accomplish even more.”
- Fun is a management tool.
- Some perks are justified, others are just ego stuff for executives.
- Always look for mentors.
- Refuse to be a pawn.

The Sum of Experience

Autry learned a lot about leadership in his long career, and he sums up those lessons as:

- All growth and most good things come from paying attention.
- Use every experience from your personal and professional life.
- Never think of employees as “labor,” a commodity.
- Avoid the tyranny of technocracy. Don’t ignore relationships.
- Abandon career planning and income plans. Leave the door open for the unexpected; it can be far more fulfilling.
- Avoid “building” a resume by taking jobs just because you think they’ll look good.
- Expect the unexpected and be ready to embrace change.

About The Author

James A. Autry is an author, poet and consultant. Before taking early retirement in 1991 to pursue his present career, Autry was president of Meredith Corp.’s Magazine Group, a \$500 million operation with more than 900 employees. During his 32-year career, Autry served as a daily newspaper reporter, editor and publisher of a city magazine, editor of one of the country’s largest magazines, and vice president and editor-in-chief of all books and magazines at Meredith Corp. He is the author of *Love and Profit* and *Life and Work*, as well as two collections of poetry.

Buzz-Words

Human connections/ Intrapreneuring / Real management