



Book Never Give a Sucker an Even Break

W.C. Fields on Business

Ronald Fields and Shaun O.L. Higgins
FT Prentice Hall, 2000

Recommendation

W.C. Fields's grandson, Ronald Fields, draws on the comic's biography, movie plots and sayings to illustrate key business principles. He covers such topics as leadership, creativity and innovation, managing change, effective teamwork, delegation, budgeting, office politics, and communication. Many of the ideas for business success are familiar, but the link with W.F. Fields makes them novel and entertaining. Appropriately, the book is written in a breezy style that makes it enjoyable to read, and Fields includes a summary of key principles at the end of each chapter. *BooksInShort* particularly likes the collection of W.C. Fields's humorous sayings at the end of the book. Even though some ideas and, for shame, even some sentences are repeated, the book has broad appeal for anyone who likes business and loves to laugh. If you're thinking stocking stuffer or get-well gift, this'll do.

Take-Aways

- W.C. Fields was a comic genius of vaudeville, silent films and "talkies."
- He is noted for pithy one-liners such as, "Never give a sucker an even break!"
- Fields' life shows the importance of branding, in that he consciously established, extended and protected his own image.
- His career reflects the role of resourcefulness, since he continually ad-libbed."
- He was creative and inventive, often devising comic personas and funny props.
- Fields was a master of change, because he had to adapt as society and the entertainment industry evolved during the 1920s and 1930s.
- Fields' participation in the movies shows how teams have to work together.
- He was excellent at negotiating his contracts to make good deals.
- Fields used the key elements of negotiation - time, power and information - to his advantage.
- Fields' crisis management rules are "don't panic" and "don't create problems where they don't exist."

Summary

The Heritage of W.C. Fields

W.C. Fields (born William Claude Dukenfeld) has long been considered a great comic genius, known for his vaudeville acts and his humor in silent films and early talkies. He also gained fame for his pungent one-liners, including, "Never give a sucker an even break!" "You can't cheat an honest man!" and "You can fool half the people all the time... and that's enough to make a good living."

“W.C. Fields knew that having an idea was not enough; an idea had to be polished, tested and reworked until it was perfected.”

To express his humor, he created a number of alter egos, such as Professor Eustace P. McGardle and Augustus Q. Winterbottom. He could find the humor in routine, everyday situations, such as buying a stamp or playing a round of golf. He also poked fun at bureaucratic bungling and difficult people.

“When W.C. Fields saw good work, he credited it. As a result, he seldom was denied the right to build on the good work of others as a means of improving his own routines.”

He was born in 1880 just outside of Philadelphia and shortened his name to W.C. Fields so it would fit on a stage marquee. His father was a wholesale vegetable merchant and Fields often characterized his family as "poor but dishonest." Since he was the son of a merchant, he learned about running a small business as a child. When he was twelve, he got a job in a department store and, as a teenager, he helped his father sell fruits and vegetables from a street cart. At 18, he began in vaudeville as a juggler, tossing his father's fruits and vegetables.

“Fields’ work provides countless examples showing that, in comedy, what you say is important, how you say it is more important, but when you say it can be the most important of all.”

As his career developed from vaudeville through the silent films and talkies, Fields reflected a number of the principles of good business. Among other things, his life shows the importance of branding in that he "consciously established, extended and protected his image," and he also participated in product mentions, through which he promoted Chesterfield and Lucky Strike Cigarettes and Chase & Sanborn coffee. He made good use of creative thinking and wrote down ideas so he wouldn't forget them. He polished, tested and reworked his ideas to finish his act. An effective communicator, he wrote many letters of all types, from letters of complaint to thank you notes to audition letters. He knew the value of good timing, and knew that when you say something is more important than what you say or how you say it.

“W.C. Fields never wasted an idea. If an idea wasn't practical as a real invention, he would incorporate it into his comedy routines and films.”

He was known for his adaptability, such as turning his straight juggling act into a comic one, by making good use of his flubs. In fact, W.C. Fields' career, sayings and movie plots hold some surprising business lessons.

On Leadership...

The three main types of leadership books are those on the general theory and practice of leadership, those on applying leadership principles in organizations and those on personal leadership and celebrity role models. These books emphasize following some basic principles, such as wanting to lead, having a plan you believe in passionately and working hard. You also need to have a good team and a thick skin, to be articulate and able to inspire commitment from others, and to know how to rebound after setbacks. W.C. Fields showed all these traits when he played the president of a mythical European country in his movie, Million Dollar Legs. As the "president" sought a way to fill his country's empty treasury, he decided that it should participate in the 1932 Olympic games. He appointed a head coach to lead the effort, which resulted in a victory and saved the treasury.

On Resourcefulness...

Fields' career reflects his resourcefulness. He was expert at continual ad-libbing, leading to "hilarious and profitable results." He was especially good at knowing how to build on his strengths and turn his weaknesses or negatives into positives. For example, when his name wouldn't fit on a marquee, instead of billing himself as "William Claude Dukenfield, Juggler Extraordinaire" he changed his name and act to: "W.C. Fields: Tramp Juggler." He also developed a completely silent act, so he could play easily in different countries. He used ad-libbing to create better lines in his scripts.

“Fields’ career testifies to his resourcefulness. He ad-libbed ad infinitum throughout his career with hilarious and profitable results.”

In the workplace, these abilities enable you to find ways to overcome perceived liabilities. For instance, the W&K ad agency showed Nike that it could provide an effective campaign for them though the agency was located in rural Oregon, some 10 miles from Nike, when Nike wanted to move its account to Los Angeles. Another key is to think ahead about what could go wrong and be ready to act to turn lemons into lemonade.

On Creativity and Innovation...

W.C. Fields had to learn to be innovative early on, since he didn't have the money to buy tricks. He had to invent his own act, and eventually created many props, such as the Necktie Soup Set, which contained six ties that matched the color of the types of soup that might be spilled on them. He used language inventively, and came up with funny and unusual names for people, places and things, such as Cow Catcher, New Mexico, and Loudmouth McNasty. Fields kept a notebook of ideas so he wouldn't forget them, and later could develop promising notions into material for his acts.

“Even with extraordinary talent, the odds are against you if your team doesn't come together.”

Similarly, you can develop your creativity in a number of ways, alone and in a team. When people work together they can come up with even more ideas than someone can who is working alone. Keep your own idea diary. And if your everyday pursuits become too easy, try stretching yourself and increasing your level of challenge.

On Managing Change...

W.C. Fields had to be a "master of change" because his lifetime spanned great transitions in the entertainment business and in the U.S. as a whole. Vaudeville was big when he began, but faded with the rise of motion pictures and radio. Then movies went from silent films to talkies. Two world wars and the shift into and out of the Great Depression brought many social changes, exacerbated by technological change, such as the growing popularity of the automobile and the advent of commercial air traffic. Fields had to continually change his act in response to these changes, and he did so successfully.

“Team members have to be able to rely on each other within the context of the team's mission. They must know what to expect from other members of the team.”

While you can plan for ordinary change, as Fields' experience shows, you have to be more adaptable when you encounter transitional change. Just as Fields had to reposition himself for changes in the entertainment industry, so you must change when business as usual doesn't work. By changing now, you become better able to adapt again if needed in the future.

On Teamwork...

W.C. Fields knew teamwork, since making a movie is "the ultimate team effort," uniting many people with strong egos to produce a finished product. The key elements in movie making, which apply to any team effort, include:

- A clear mission, based on making a specific movie with a specific script.
- Each team member knows his or her role.
- Everyone knows how his or her contribution will be credited.
- Team members know what their compensation and bonuses will be.
- There is a clear end of the team involvement when the movie ends.

“When putting together a team, try to stock it with people who can work and play well with others. If you don’t have that option, make sure the ground rules are clear.”

Team members need to be able to rely on each other in achieving the team mission. They have to know what to expect from each other. If the team doesn’t coalesce, success is less likely. Thus, when you put together a team, try to build it with people who can work well together, or at least have clear ground rules, so everyone knows his or her role and task.

On Delegation...

W.C. Fields demonstrated delegation in the movie, *You Can’t Cheat an Honest Man*. He plays Larsen E. Whipsnade, a circus owner. He finds the solution to delegating by putting an ignorant but honest rube in charge, so he doesn’t have to fear sabotage from someone more intelligent and crafty. As this story illustrates, when you delegate, the most effective choice is not always the best person for the job, but the person who can best do the job you want done. For successful delegating, make sure people know the rules and tasks before you give them a project, and make sure they are "capable, trustworthy and responsible."

On Negotiation...

Fields was excellent in negotiating both on the screen, such as in the 1934 film *It’s a Gift*, and in his career. As Harold Bissonette in the film, he turns a worthless piece of land into a successful orange grove by using skillful negotiation. He gets a horse-track promoter to meet his price and ends up with a win-win deal. During his career, Fields used his negotiating skills to get a better contract when he knew the studio desperately wanted him for a picture.

“Delegating authority is not always a matter of finding the best person for the job, but rather finding the best person to do the job the way you want it done.”

The keys to negotiation in your work include making skillful use of the three central factors in any negotiation - time, power and information. It’s critical to know the difference between official and real deadlines and to know your actual relative clout in a negotiation. The more information you have the better, since the side with the best information is better able to "cut the best deal." As Fields stated: "Timing is everything! Unless you’re asleep." Or, "When in doubt, pause... and just say, 'No!'"

On Office Politics...

W.C. Fields weighed in on office politics when he played Mr. Micawber, an employee of the white-collar villain, Uriah Heep. Micawber uses flattery, backstabbing and manipulation to undermine Heep, until Micawber eventually decides "enough is enough." Then, he finds real evidence to defeat Heep. Thus you, too, can be strategic in achieving your ends.

On Difficult People...

Fields’ movies illustrate how to deal with many kinds of difficult people, including drunks, grumpy old men and procrastinators - in fact, he portrayed them all. In business, you can reduce the difficulties you face from employees by carefully screening candidates to find the right people. Then, define your expectations for the job, regularly monitor people’s performance, retrain and re-motivate people when someone goes off track and be ready to fire people, but carefully, so you don’t get sued.

On Crisis Management...

W.C. Fields’ lessons on crisis management include always having a plan and never panicking. Don’t create problems where they don’t exist, or as he put it: "Don’t pump water if the boat’s not leaking."

On Branding...

W.C. Fields created himself as a brand with unique selling propositions, such as having a distinctive voice, look and persona based on his raspy voice, red nose and enjoyment of liquor. He emphasized going after the customers who are most receptive to what you are doing, noting that "some customers will never be happy, no matter what you do."

On Ethics...

Fields is known for some of his pungent sayings, all with an underlying ethical message, including "You can't cheat an honest man," "Never smarten up a chump" and "Never give a sucker an even break!"

About the Authors

Ronald Fields , the grandson of W.C. Fields, wrote the bestseller *W.C. Fields by Himself*. A playwright, he won an Emmy for the screenplay for *W.C. Fields Straight Up*. He has lectured on W.C. Fields and creative writing at more than 500 colleges and universities, and is currently the vice president of creative development at Hollywood-on-Air. **Shaun O’L. Higgins** is chairman and CEO of Print Marketing Concepts, Inc. He wrote several books, including *The Newspaper in Art*. In 1986, he began using movies to train new managers at Cowles Publishing Company in Spokane, Washington, and he serves as the director of marketing and sales at Spokane’s newspaper, *The Spokesman Review*.
