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**Book Review: *How Will You Measure Your Life?***, By Clayton M. Christensen, James Allworth and Karen Dillon. New York, NY: Harper Business, 2012. 240 pages, hard cover.

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## **Book Review: *How Will You Measure Your Life?***

### **Abstract**

How will you measure your life? is the question that Clayton M. Christensen, James Allworth and Karen Dillon set out to answer in this stimulating book, applying management theories to the task of developing a strategy for life. The question was motivated by an observation Christensen made concerning his fellow Harvard Business School alumni: Despite their professional accomplishments, “many of them were clearly unhappy” (Christensen, Allworth, & Dillon, 2012: p. 2). To investigate this matter, the authors apply the study of abstract theory, in the form of statements as to what causes things to happen and why, followed by an application of theory to the examination of the problems and opportunities of a real-world company and, finally, the use of theory to predict what problems and opportunities are likely to occur in that company’s future. They make a compelling argument that, by transferring this approach to the personal sphere, a theory can be developed that can explain and predict the degree of happiness and satisfaction in both the professional and private spheres of an individual’s life—in much the same way as management scholars deploy theories to explain and predict corporate success and failure.

### **Review**

*How will you measure your life?* is the question that Clayton M. Christensen of Harvard Business School sets out to answer in this stimulating book, applying management theories to the task of developing a strategy for life. The question was motivated by an observation Christensen made concerning his fellow Harvard Business School alumni: over the decades, an increasing number no longer attended their regular reunions; but it was not clear why. Among his classmates were executives of renowned consulting and finance firms; others were on their way to the top of Fortune 500 companies; others again were successful entrepreneurs and a few were earning life-changing amounts of money. But despite these professional accomplishments, Christensen felt that the shunning of reunions had a more subtle reason than lacking time for or interest in these get-togethers—rather it became evident to him that “many of them were clearly unhappy” (Christensen, Allworth, & Dillon, 2012: p. 2).

Over time, Christensen realized that behind the semblance of professional success there were more than a few who did not enjoy what they were doing for a living and there were numerous stories of unhappy marriages and divorces. In the book, he illustrates this by sharing anecdotes about peers who set off with the best of intentions to serve their communities and to make the

world a better place, but who at some point in time found themselves mired in deep personal dissatisfaction, professional struggles, family failure or even criminal behavior. But clearly, none of them had graduated with a deliberate strategy of becoming miserable. Yet this was the strategy that too many had ended up implementing. What had sent these people in the wrong direction?

Christensen applies an approach from his own management teaching and research as a way of understanding the origins of their misery: the study of abstract theory, in the form of statements as to *what* causes things to happen and *why*, followed by an application of theory to the examination of the problems and opportunities of a real-world company and, finally, the use of theory to predict what problems and opportunities are likely to occur in that company's future. He makes a compelling argument that, by transferring this approach to the personal sphere, a theory can be developed that can explain and predict the degree of happiness and satisfaction in both the professional and private spheres of an individual's life—in much the same way as management scholars deploy theories to explain and predict corporate success and failure. As the insights generated by such a theory of personal happiness and satisfaction are particularly important to those who are about to embark on their professional and personal journey, Christensen describes how he gives these a prominent role in the teaching of his students: On the last day of a course he regularly steers the discussion towards encouraging his students to reflect on what management theories might offer them as “tool boxes” for developing and implementing a successful strategy for their personal lives. To structure these often intense classes, he uses three straightforward yet challenging questions, and these same questions set the stage for the three main sections of the book (Christensen et al., 2012: 6):

*“How can I make sure that ...*

*(1) ... I will be successful and happy in my career?*

*(2) ... my relationships with my spouse, my children, and my extended family and close friends become an enduring source of happiness?*

*(3) ... I live a life in integrity—and stay out of jail?”*

Due to the success of these classes he asked two colleagues, James Allworth, a Harvard Business School graduate, and Karen Dillon, former editor of the Harvard Business Review, to help him bring the message of these classes to a wider audience and to turn his observations and classroom activities into a book.

Each of the three main sections shows how management theories may be applied to elements of an individual's life in order to maximize the chances of achieving a strategy that best promotes happiness and satisfaction. Each section is divided into subchapters, usually starting with a company example followed by the introduction of a particular management theory highlighting

the causes and mechanisms that produce the outcome described in the company example. The theory is then extended to issues and decisions in the personal sphere along the dimensions of career, relationships with family and friends and integrity.

The first section leverages the concept of strategy as a means of finding career satisfaction. The authors start from the premise that an unhappy career is the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of what really motivates us. Drawing on “principal-agent theory” (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) and the “two-factor theory of motivation” (Herzberg, 1968) they suggest that it is easy for people to lose sight of what really motivates them and leads to happiness as a result of their ambitious pursuit of what Herzberg terms “hygiene factors” such as money, status and job security. However, finding a career that both motivates the individual and satisfies hygiene factors is only half the battle. It is equally important to balance the pursuit of deliberate aspirations with the taking of advantage of emerging opportunities. Against this backdrop, the authors oppose the common belief that young people need to have their careers planned out step-by-step for the next five years, stressing that this risks foregoing unexpected but promising opportunities. They use Mintzbergs’ and Waters’ (1985) distinction between deliberate and emergent strategy as theoretical framework to encourage the reader to experiment with different opportunities, i.e., following an emergent strategy path, and only starting to pursue a deliberate strategy once both hygiene factors and motivation factors are satisfied. The virtue of strategy implementation is emphasized towards the end of the section. Having a clear strategy in life means nothing if one does not invest one’s limited resources in a way which is consistent with it. In companies, as in the personal sphere, resource allocation is a messy process, manifesting itself in numerous, small, daily decisions, but it is this process which ultimately determines which initiatives get funding and are eventually implemented. The innovator's dilemma (Christensen, 1997) underlines this, by stressing the importance of attending to what companies do rather than what they say their strategy is: in other words, it is vital to watch closely where one’s resources are directed—if the direction of flow is not in line with the strategy, one runs the risk that one’s life will turn out differently from how one intended.

Section two starts by pinpointing a mistake made by many high-potential young professionals: thinking that investment in career and relationships with family and friends can be sequenced over time. Tempted by the immediate and tangible returns of professional achievement, they tend to over-invest key resources (time, energy) in their careers at the expense of their personal relationships, despite the latter being a sustained and fundamental source of happiness. The authors illustrate that such behavior parallels that of companies that miss out on investing in new businesses opportunities until they realize they need those revenues. Blending Bhide’s (1990) work

on entrepreneurship with Olson and van Bever's (2009) research on the growth of firms, Christensen et al. offer compelling arguments to illustrate the many ways in which investment in family and friends needs to be made long before there is any sign that this is paying off. By drawing on research from a variety of disciplines such as Strategic Management, Human Resources Management, Sociology and Social Psychology, the authors portray eloquently how to best think of one's role in these relationships and why commitment to fulfilling this role can be a source of enduring happiness.

The third and final section is devoted to a widespread, yet dangerous, way of thinking that biases the resource allocation and investment decisions of companies and individuals alike. To illustrate this fallacy, the authors discuss the paradoxical situation in which large, established companies with abundant capital often consider an investment alternative to be too costly, whereas small entrants with much less capital find the same investment straightforward. They relate this paradox to the instinct to consider only marginal costs when evaluating investment decision alternatives that camouflages the true cost of such decisions which typically only become apparent in retrospect and might be disastrous. They show that, just as the *marginal thinking trap*, as they term it, can explain the failure of many big companies, so too does it serve as a predictor of failure in personal life. To avoid such failure, staying honest and having strong moral principles is a key success factor not just for companies but also for individuals who seek happiness in their careers and relationships—even more so when it comes to staying out of jail as a result of situations where ethical and moral dilemmas can seduce people into engaging in unlawful actions.

The book concludes with an epilogue emphasizing the imperative role of *purpose* in strategy making, not only if companies are to succeed in the marketplace, but also if individuals are to achieve happiness in their careers and private lives. After a description of how companies might develop their sense of purpose through the defining of what they want to become—their “likeness”, the generating of commitment to the likeness among managers and employees, and the creating of metrics for measuring progress towards it, the last few pages cover Christensen's personal reflections on how he found his own purpose in life.

The key strength of this book lies in the unique way Christensen et al. distill insights from theories of management and organization research and translate them into the context of an individual's professional and private life. The text engages and entertains without compromising on the serious presentation of research findings. It offers an abundance of theory-based advice as to how to increase the odds of a successful and happy life and is tailored to demanding readers who favor an understanding of underlying causes and the mechanisms that connect them to certain outcomes. In this it stands in stark contrast to the genre of pseudo-intellectual self-help books

which offer simplistic answers to complex questions of the ones tackled here. The theories are well explained and presented in an accessible way for the lay reader, along with suggestions for further study. However, some experts in the field might suggest certain other theories to include or feel that some details and boundary conditions could have been considered in more detail when transferring the theories to the private sphere. What stands out in the end is Christensen's courage in sharing intimate aspects of his own professional and private experiences that not only lends great authenticity to the account but also has the effect of presenting him as a true source of inspiration.

*How will you measure your live?* is an example of Christensen's work as primarily a teacher and mentor rather than researcher and is a persuasive account of how management research can transcend the business setting to serve as a predictor of both personal and professional happiness. Although it is not presented as such, large parts of the book would also lend themselves as an ideal teaching resource for familiarizing students with key concepts in the field of strategy making and possibly even more importantly, helping them to engage personally with academic ideas which are all too often perceived as too abstract. This is certainly a hidden quality of the book.

This book has the potential to have a significant impact. Christensen et al. give the reader the tools for seeing strategy from a different point of view, broadening the reader's understanding of strategy making and encouraging an appreciation of its power to positively affect one's personal life. It offers practitioners a set of theories selected for their relevance to their daily strategy work and lecturers a blueprint for making the sometimes abstract concepts of strategy more tangible to students and for teaching them how to use their own experiences as a useful arena in which to apply strategic thinking.

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