

# Interview with David Maister

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David Maister is one of the leading writers on management today. Many managers and consultants love his books, which include titles like True Professionalism, The Trusted Advisor, First among Equals, and Practice what you Preach. What makes these books so popular with managers and professionals must be that they are full of practical advice. On top of that, they are written in a pleasant and easy style. We were surprised to find out that writing was once an activity David hated.

*Coert- You are now one of the most popular and best-known management authors. But what got you started writing books?*

David - My book writing divides into two time periods. Until 1985, I was an academic, teaching at the University of British Columbia and the Harvard Business School. During that time, I wrote (or co-authored) seven books, on such diverse subjects as managing a trucking company, the airline industry and factory operations. All of those books (now, thankfully, out of print and forgotten) were written to play the academic game.

In 1985, I left academia to launch my consulting practice, aimed at serving professional service firms. In spite of the academic writing I had done, I still did not enjoy writing. In fact, it terrified me. Whenever I had some writing to do, I would

get agitated, literally sweat and avoid the task like the plague.

Yet I knew that writing was the best way to get known, and to create an audience for my work. So, I promised a (trade) magazine editor that I would write an article every month, knowing full well that I was committing myself to something that I would not enjoy, but which would get me where I wanted to go. In addition, it was emotionally easier to think about writing (only) an article, instead of a book (which seemed like a monumental task.) Having no choice, I lived up to my commitment and, after three years, found that about two-thirds of the articles were acceptable, and about one-third I wished I had not written. I was still insecure about it, so I did not collect my articles together for another five years, when I chose the best ones and published them as *Managing the Professional Service Firm*. Suddenly, I was "the guy who wrote the book" (which was a nice feeling.) The book didn't sell that well at first, but nice things were said about it.

Then, I faced another level of terror. It had taken me 10 years to collect enough articles for my first book. It was rather like being a pop group that puts out a successful first album based on everything they had done in their lives, then had to write another bunch of songs for the second album in a much

shorter time. So, I just kept trying. I made a binding commitment to send my clients two articles every three months (getting the ideas from my consulting work.) In four years, I had enough for my second book. By this time, I was actually finding writing enjoyable, and between 2000 and 2002, I wrote (or coauthored) three more books, and am working on another one for 2004.

*Coert- What do you consider to be the best book you have written yet and why?*

David - Since my motivation in writing books is to help people, my test of my "best book" is not the writing or the originality of the thinking. Quite simply, my best book is the one that readers have actually used and applied the most, and obtained the most benefit from. So, it has to be *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, the first book. I like the others, and many readers do too, but they have not had the impact that the first book did. Some of them have sold as well as the first book, but I don't think they have had as big an impact on people's lives. So, by my definition, they are not my best books.

*Coert- Your book 'Practice what you preach' provides impressive proof of the causal relationship between how you treat people and objective success measures. I noticed this research confirmed the value of some ideas you have been writing about for many years. What do you consider to be its main message? Were there also big surprises in the outcomes of this research, things you had not expected at all?*

David - I was surprised and delighted by the findings in this research. I set out to test some hypotheses, and worked hard to keep my own biases out of it, and let the data speak for itself. Yet, the conclusions confirmed much of what I had written before. As I tell my clients: "The bad news is I still believe the crazy things I have told you before; the worse news is that I now have proof!"

The main message is very straightforward: you make the most money in a business when your people are energized, excited and enthused. Notice, that is not the same as "be nice to people" or "keep your staff happy." What you need to do in business to succeed is not very intellectually complicated. However, you do need lots of passion, ambition, drive and discipline to get it done. It really is similar to my experience in my career. I honestly believe that most of my books have been common sense. My competitive advantage, if I have one, is not my intelligence. Instead, it is that, that while many people could have written about the things I wrote, they didn't and I did. I got it done. That's an important message.

The second message of the book is that few people can sustain energy, excitement and enthusiasm on their own. Few of us have that amount of self-discipline. (That's why I made binding promises to people to force me to write.) Most of us need a good coach, i.e. a manager, to bring out the best in us. The study is very clear that the source of energy, drive and discipline is not the systems of the firm, but the talents of the individual manager. That's quite an important conclusion, since few managers are actually taught how to manage. (They are taught business, but that's a separate subject.)

The biggest surprise in the study, which I did not anticipate at all, was how important was the character of the manager. Not his or her skills, or knowledge, or behavior, but character. Words like "trust", "honorable", "clear principles", "person of integrity" were frequently used to describe the managers who got the most out of people, and hence made the most money. I was taught that management was about processes, and systems, and knowledge and, maybe, skill.

The data suggests that, while these are important, character is most crucial. I'm not sure many businesses choose their managers primarily on character. And they should, if my data is to be believed.

*Coert- Who are your favorite management authors? Are there any management books you would really like to recommend our readers? (Which are mostly managers, human resources professionals, management consultants and students management and organization)*

David - Everyone who has to deal with people has to read Dale Carnegie's "[How to Win Friends and Influence People](#)." It's the most important business book ever written. (Seriously!) Next, I'd choose [Kouzes and Posner](#) "The Leadership Challenge." Full of wisdom, full of practical suggestions. I frequently re-read Gerald Weinberg's "Secrets of Consulting," which is applicable to everyone. I also read (and recommend) everything [Tom Peters](#) writes. Even if you only agree with a fraction of what he says, you get more ideas and stimulus to thinking than five other books.

*Coert- A bit of an experimental question: imagine your new book would come out and a real miracle would happen! Everybody would read it and understand it and implement all of its insights and wisdom. Perhaps unlikely, but remember this is a miracle ... After this miracle would have happened from what things would we notice things were different?*

David - The miracle would be that we would all understand how human beings work a little bit better. It's a tragedy that nowhere in our education do we receive any guidance in how to deal with the people we interact with, either in personal life or professional life. Our education works on our rationality, our logic and our intelligence, but we get no help, for example, in learning how to deal with other people's emotions or, for that matter, our own. Did anyone ever teach you how to critique your spouse in such a way that your comments were received as helpful advice instead of an attack? How do you get other people to willingly do what you want? What do you do if someone has let you down? These are all important skills we must learn,

but most of us have to develop them through trial and error. I don't think I have many of the answers, but I think, at age 56, I have learned a few lessons that I would love to share with people in their twenties, so they can avoid the mistakes I made.

Too many people think business is about logic, analysis, rationality, detached discussions and being "right." It's not. Business is about people's messy emotions, whether they are clients, superiors, subordinates or colleagues.

*Coert- On our site there is a lively discussion about developments in the profession of consultants? Questions discussed are: isn't the consultancy profession stagnating? Aren't consultants often too superficial and too commercial (especially the large firms)? Aren't they too much led by hypes? Isn't consultancy becoming too standardized? What are your thoughts on these topics?*

David - One of the difficulties of talking about consultancy is that it actually covers an incredibly wide range of activities, many of which have nothing to do with each other. For example, designing and installing an IT system has nothing to do with providing strategic advice, which has nothing to do with factory productivity improvement. How the people provide value, how they interact with their clients, the definition of quality, what skills are needed, all of these vary incredibly.

For me, the most important distinction is the difference between being an expert and an advisor/counselor. The expert's job is to be "right", and to have the technical skills to solve problems. However, the advisor/counselor's job is not to be right, but to be helpful. There is a world of difference between being able to solve a client's problem, and being able to help the client solve his or her own problem. I think one of the problems that the consulting profession has today, is that there are too many

"experts" and not enough "advisor/counselors." The reason is clear.

To be an advisor, you must not only know your field, but you need very advanced skills in working with clients (and client organizations) to help them solve their own problems. The IT firms don't usually do this, and the strategy firms often don't do this. They are still selling brains or ideas or insights. It isn't just strategy versus implementation. So much of what's called implementation is still the outsider doing things "for" or "to" the client organization. It's not improving the client organization.

As a result, the benefits to the client are limited, and clients are becoming skeptical of the value of consulting. A lot of firms think they are addressing this by selling "change management," but what they do is still not counseling: it's running the client through a relatively fixed methodology of processes, many of them bureaucratic. By the way, I include myself in this problem. Often, I can see what the client needs to do, and can get the client to understand that it needs to be done. But getting it done (dealing with politics, resistance, fear, turf battles, the need for consensus) really stretches my skills as a counselor. The process that is required is emotionally charged, and I was never trained in this. And, of course, few other consultants are either.

*Coert- You mentioned that business is about people's messy emotions; an intriguing point that I fully agree with. Both clients and consultants seem to find it hard to deal with this fact. Do you have any suggestions for consultants how to deal with this?*

The first battle is to accept that it's all about emotions, and not resent the fact that the emotions get in the way of your logic. It's also important to recognize that this is not only about other people's messy emotions, but your own. It's telling that Daniel Goleman put "self management" as one of the first

elements of emotional intelligence in his book of that name.

Let me give an example. A year or so ago, my wife, Kathy, turned to me and said "David, can I get your help?" Of course, I said yes. She said "Well, when we travel, we are usually lucky enough to stay in hotel suites, and your smoking doesn't bother me. But, occasionally, we are in small hotel rooms, and I find that, then, the smoke makes my eyes itchy. What do you think I should do about that?"

This is, of course, brilliant. She had every right to be angry, but she knew that expressing her anger would reduce the chances of my cooperation, not increase it. She had every right to criticize me, but she knew that, when attacked, people attack back. She did not approach the problem as a logical, rational one to be "solved," but an interpersonal, psychological, emotional one. She was less concerned about being right, and more concerned about getting what she wanted.

How do you learn this? Some reading can help, including Goleman's book. But mostly it's practice, preferably with a colleague to watch you, so you can discuss afterwards "Was there a better way to say that?"

*Coert- I think there is great consistency in your thinking and your books (and I like that). But what is new in your thinking? What are things you're discovering / learning about now? What are you curious about? Do you have future plans you would like to say something about?*

David - As I said in the introduction to *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, "All theory is autobiography." I am fascinated by who succeeds and why, and I don't think I have finished my explorations. Most authors and consultants tend to tackle bigger subjects as they progress (for example as Michael Porter did when he went from the competitive advantage of companies to studying the competitive advantage of nations.) I have been tempted to do that,

because my clients ask about "big" subjects like mergers, and globalization, and technology.

But, to tell the truth, those things don't interest me. My path has been to go deeper and look at finer detail. I think there's still a lot that I don't understand about dealing with people, managing, working with clients, and I see a lot of my clients also needing to improve in those areas. At the moment, I am writing a book for young professionals on the secrets of building a successful career. Its (tentative) title is "Stumbling Upwards." After that, I'll wait to see where my passions take me. My business principle has always been "Follow your passion, not your logic." So far, that principle has served me well