

# CAMP\*AIGN RESPONSE

To May 19, 2009, NY Times OPED, *In Praise of Dullness* (full article on p. 2)

---

Dear David,

In “Praise of Dullness” is of profound importance.

Consider the logical outcome of a community where values such as “being a good listener, a good team builder, an enthusiastic colleague, a great communicator,” are considered a liability in terms of survival value. In such a world being, “warm, flexible, team-oriented and empathetic,” would in fact decrease one’s potential to survive and thrive.

Recently I attended the funeral of a young man, 17-years-old. He was handsome, popular, and had a warm and loving family. He belonged to the International Baccalaureate Program, the National Honor Society and was a reporter at school. He was an Eagle Scout and co-captain of both the wrestling and baseball teams.

The other day, he left church (he was also a Deacon), went home, locked himself in the bathroom, took out a gun and ..... and it was Mother’s Day.

Why? No one had a clue. There were no signs. Over 1,000 people attended the funeral; all were stunned beyond belief.

Our organization repeatedly emphasizes that, “The force of the pressures of modern society now exceed the capacity of a young person to withstand.” Thus, the rash of school shootings, acts of violence, classroom chaos, dropouts and suicides among U.S. youth (In 10-14-year-old girls the rate is up a stunning 76%).

Humankind is crossing a new threshold. Old laws, like old wineskins, cannot restrain the dynamics of the modern age. The raw force of natural selection, operating in the shadows as always, will do its solemn duty to impact the development and nature of character – but only with our permission.

Qualifying our “captains of industry” in terms of how little they care for others is to guarantee that future generations will adopt the same values. For, natural selection will insist that kindness, compassion, and consideration be out-bred, and that callousness and cold heartedness be in-bred. If we permit this trend to continue, the day coming when you and I will ask ourselves, “Whatever became of wonder-bred?”

All good wishes,

  
rev. Jon M'kl Sherry  
Founding Director

**The Camp\*aign for American Kids:** *a little change ... for a WHOLE life!*

Camp\*aign HQ: 11616 Long Meadow Dr • Glen Allen, VA • 23059 • (804) 266-7130

[www.ForAmericanKids.org](http://www.ForAmericanKids.org) • [Jon@ForAmericanKids.org](mailto:Jon@ForAmericanKids.org)

# In Praise of Dullness

May 19, 2009, Op-Ed Columnist [DAVID BROOKS](#)

---

Should C.E.O.'s read novels?

The question seems to answer itself. After all, C.E.O.'s work with people all day. Novel-reading should give them greater psychological insight, a feel for human relationships, a greater sensitivity toward their own emotional chords.

Sadly, though, most of the recent research suggests that these are not the most important talents for a person who is trying to run a company. Steven Kaplan, Mark Klebanov and Morten Sorensen recently completed a study called "Which C.E.O. Characteristics and Abilities Matter?"

They relied on detailed personality assessments of 316 C.E.O.'s and measured their companies' performances. They found that strong people skills correlate loosely or not at all with being a good C.E.O. Traits like being a good listener, a good team builder, an enthusiastic colleague, a great communicator do not seem to be very important when it comes to leading successful companies.

What mattered, it turned out, were execution and organizational skills. The traits that correlated most powerfully with success were attention to detail, persistence, efficiency, analytic thoroughness and the ability to work long hours.

In other words, warm, flexible, team-oriented and empathetic people are less likely to thrive as C.E.O.'s. Organized, dogged, anal-retentive and slightly boring people are more likely to thrive.

These results are consistent with a lot of work that's been done over the past few decades. In 2001, Jim Collins published a best-selling study called "Good to Great." He found that the best C.E.O.'s were not the flamboyant visionaries. They were humble, self-effacing, diligent and resolute souls who found one thing they were really good at and did it over and over again.

That same year Murray Barrick, Michael Mount and Timothy Judge surveyed a century's worth of research into business leadership. They, too, found that extroversion, agreeableness and openness to new experience did not correlate well with C.E.O. success. Instead, what mattered was emotional stability and, most of all, conscientiousness — which means being dependable, making plans and following through on them.

All this work is a reminder that, while it's important to be a sensitive, well-rounded person for the sake of your inner fulfillment, the market doesn't really care. The market wants you to fill an organizational role.

The market seems to want C.E.O.'s to offer a clear direction for their companies. There's a tension between being resolute and being flexible. The research suggests it's more important to be resolute, even at the cost of some flexibility.

The second thing the market seems to want from leaders is a relentless and somewhat mind-numbing commitment to incremental efficiency gains. Charismatic C.E.O.'s and politicians always want the exciting new breakthrough — whether it is the S.U.V. or a revolutionary new car. The methodical executives at successful companies just make the same old four-door sedan, but they make it better and better.

These sorts of dogged but diffident traits do not correlate well with education levels. C.E.O.'s with law or M.B.A. degrees do not perform better than C.E.O.'s with college degrees. These traits do not correlate with salary or compensation packages. Nor do they correlate with fame and recognition. On the contrary, a study by Ulrike Malmendier and Geoffrey Tate found that C.E.O.'s get less effective as they become more famous and receive more awards.

What these traits do add up to is a certain ideal personality type. The C.E.O.'s that are most likely to succeed are humble, diffident, relentless and a bit unidimensional. They are often not the most exciting people to be around.

For this reason, people in the literary, academic and media worlds rarely understand business. It is nearly impossible to think of a novel that accurately portrays business success. That's because the virtues that writers tend to admire — those involving self-expression and self-exploration — are not the ones that lead to corporate excellence.

For the same reason, business and politics do not blend well. Business leaders tend to perform poorly in Washington, while political leaders possess precisely those talents — charisma, charm, personal skills — that are of such limited value when it comes to corporate execution.

Fortunately, America is a big place. Literary culture has thrived in Boston, New York and on campuses. Political culture has thrived in Washington. Until recently, corporate culture has been free to thrive in such unlikely places as Bentonville, Omaha and Redmond.

Of course, that's changing. We now have an administration freely interposing itself in the management culture of industry after industry. It won't be the regulations that will be costly, but the revolution in values. When Washington is a profit center, C.E.O.'s are forced to adopt the traits of politicians. That is the insidious way that other nations have lost their competitive edge.