

BOOK REVIEW

SALLY PULLEY – *Extrinsic Services Ltd*

“The Reputation Game: The art of changing how people see you” by David Waller and Rupert Young

Like many other members of RiskNZ, my plans to spend a few months of 2020 overseas have been put on indefinite hold because of Covid-19. Pondering about what best to do during the NZ L4 lockdown (apart from pounding the streets to keep up the fitness levels) I decided to spend some time in catching up on reading, whilst monitoring news and information channels as Covid related disruption impacted the globe.

“The Reputation Game: The Art of Changing How People See You”, was published in 2017. So why should a 2017 book be relevant now, in the Age of Covid? One answer is that Covid-19 presents nations, organisations and people with crisis situations. In a crisis decisions need to be taken at speed, and actions become formulated as stories and travel through networks. Reputations can become damaged when stories are not well managed and coordinated across multiple story-tellers and time.

Real-life examples are used to discuss how reputations were affected by actions taken during, and post, various historic crises - wars, the financial crisis of 2007-2008, and various organisational crises such as BP’s handling of the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

I found the reading both fascinating and entertaining. Peer-reviewed research and interviews (and some humour) are used to discuss how reputations are made, lost, and sometimes repaired.

The book discusses the three dice in the reputations game: Behaviours, Networks, and Narratives. Part I looks at Reputation Strategies, and Part II looks at Reputation in Practice.

Part I provides an introduction to the rules of the game (Behaviours, Networks, and Narratives) using examples that range from Viking berserkers to the character of bankers, and how the internet dissolves space and collapses time.

News items and social media provide messages at points in time. Each message contributes to building the mosaic of interactions that influences how reputations are perceived across time.

Fragmented messaging can serve to fan the flames of negative press coverage. The book uses the Deepwater Horizon disaster as one example of this - the Chairman hired his own PR company to protect his reputation, whilst the CEO employed separate spin doctors.

Part II, Reputation in Practice, provides a variety of historic and ongoing examples of managing crisis that range from Deepwater Horizon; to the VW emissions scandal; the communication skills of Pope Francis; the reputational legacies of Blair versus Clinton; the twelve Profumo years; and more. Part II concludes with legacies, the role of the storyteller, and the power of epithet - 'one of the peculiarities of the legacy game is that it carries on when you yourself are not around to play'.

In conclusion - ultimately we are all playing the reputation game. Before you start to play, you have to ask the right questions about the kind of reputation you want, for what, and with whom.

Regardless of your perspective - national, organisational or personal, this book provides insights for understanding and managing reputational risks across time.

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Sally became a Board member of RiskNZ in 2015 and served three terms, standing down in 2020. Her interest in risk management and situational awareness was triggered at University, with her first trip into the depths of a working underground coal mine - there is nothing like stepping into the lift cage of a deep mine to build awareness of risk and engineering standards.

Sally's career can be described as helping organisations to create certainty of outcome by identifying and managing uncertainties. She worked on a project and a consultancy basis for over 30 years and, has seen both good and not-so-good approaches to the management of reputation risk.