

THE LAST WORD

How to Lie, Cheat & Steal Your Way to The Top

An interview with author Frank Adoranti



DirectorBooks: Why did you write this book?

Frank Adoranti: Because I grew tired of writing “boring” books.

I wanted to show the world (especially my kids) that a lawyer could be capable of displaying (even a momentary flash of) humour. Although, I’ll probably be disbarred from the profession for my temerity and insolence.

DB: What is your background?

FA: Grew up, went to school, went to uni and got a job. Then as my wants grew, I got a wife and had kids, got a mortgage and lots of debt. Subsequently, I decided to make a small fortune by writing books—the difficulty with that strategy was my failure to realise that I needed a large fortune to begin with!

But seriously—I’m a corporate lawyer by profession and have an MBA. I have spent time within the corporate world and then consulting to it (from the outside looking in) in a number of countries. I have witnessed, from close range, the world of corporate politics and have seen my fair share of people getting ahead on anything but merit.

DB: Given the style of the book and the fact that you first used a pseudonym, were you unnerved when you were “outed”?

FA: Some expressed their concern that it might have had an adverse effect on the series of professional books I have written. “You don’t want your clients thinking that you’re that sort of person!”

I think it will be apparent, within the first few pages of the book that I was simply having a bit of fun in cutting-loose with something a little more amusing than Commercial Contracts for Managers.

From the feedback I have had so far, many describe the fun they have had in matching some of the sections in the book to those corporate politicians in their own workplace.

In England, of course, it didn’t really

matter as much since this book was published there before my professional books were published. So the reaction in England is quite likely to be the opposite: “how could you come up with something so boring after writing this?”

DB: In the book you create a table of buzzwords. Given that lawyers are not renowned for their plain English how did you become a champion of plain English?

FA: I didn’t—I became a champion of buzzwords.

As a lawyer, the natural tendency is to say in 100 words what could be said in five words—this is especially so when one can be paid by the word. Why keep things simple and stop at a simple “yes” or “no”? That approach lacks imagination and does not permit you to put your personal stamp on things.

Actually, plain English is very hard to do. It takes a lot more time and effort to write in plain English, because it is not our natural tendency. The English language is amazing in its versatility. We all seem to be trying our best to twist it to its limits and reach new heights of convolution (or should that be convolutedness? See what I mean?)

DB: Is Don Watson of *Death Sentence* fame your hero?

FA: Don’s a great writer. His book *Death Sentence*, about the appalling state of Australia’s public language is to the buzzword industry what Afferbeck Lauder’s *Strine* was to the Orstralian language. However, I don’t find the delineation as clear-cut: where the vandalism of the language ends and where the evolution of a new word or expression begins. I also liked his Keating biography, which stands out as an interesting historical snapshot of the time, regardless of your political leanings.

With all due respect to Don though, I wouldn’t say he’s my hero—such a role model for me is grounded more closely to home. To

me, my father is my hero.

In the fictional world, my hero is Sir Humphrey Appleby (played brilliantly by Nigel Hawthorne) from the *Yes Minister* series.

DB: We all know that old adage “too many chiefs and not enough indians”. Aren’t you worried that you are giving away too many secrets?

FA: Referring to an even older adage: “I may have taught you everything you know, but not everything that I know”.

The next book will be essential to take the conniving and chicanery learned from this book to a higher plateau of corporate greed. I imagine that Sir Humphrey Appleby might be horrified with the book’s level of detail—that it might have lifted the lid on a few too many trade secrets for his liking.

DB: One of your aspirations is to become editor of *Mad Magazine*, but your work has been described as “Dilbert in words”. Aren’t these both diametrically opposed?

FA: I think that managers could learn a lot from *Dilbert* and from *Mad Magazine*. Both share the common trait of being highly underrated management training guides. Judging by the performance of some company executives, you would swear that their only source of management information and learning was *Mad Magazine*.

DB: You are planning a sequel for CEOs, those aspirants who have made the grade according to your guidelines, called *Pillage, Plunder and Exploit*. Do you have any specific role models in mind?

FA: It is always the least worthy of any group that provides the best fodder for humour. There are examples in the headlines of those who provide us with a glimpse into the annals of corporate incompetence and the squandering of public money—the way they lavish perks, bonuses and benefits upon themselves is a joy to behold. All the while, the poor old shareholder is the one who gets stiffed. Great work if you can get it!

I have heard it said that executive voraciousness is dwindling with the advent of a new corporate “cleanliness”. The cynic in me tells me that the naughty ones are just working harder and smarter to develop better ways of concealing their monkey business.

DB: Some of the words of wisdom from the book—“information is power”—did you find inspiration in the writings of Francis Bacon (aka Shakespeare)?

FA: I found a lot of inspiration from eating bacon—I just love cooked breakfasts!

Seriously, one has to get into the darker world of the likes of Macchiavelli, or, in the

modern day, writers such as Michael Korda, who wrote an interesting book on the dynamics of power. Also, more recently, many will have read the 48 Laws of Power by Robert Greene—a fun read, but not really practical. I find that I get inspired by the writings of Seneca—much of what is written is surprisingly timeless. This demonstrates that human nature is pretty much what it always was—however, in the information age, it is all just so much more visible.

DB: In the book you give some good tips for CEOs employing their 21C—would you like to elaborate?

FA: I've seen some dynamite 21Cs in my time, and some real ordinary ones. The ordinary ones were real ordinary—if you picked up on much of the corporate water cooler gossip, it was not a long stretch to form the view that the bad ones were just talentless grovellers, hanging grimly onto the coattails of their “sugar daddies”. Again, it's the worst of human nature at work—why work hard and demonstrate some real merit and ability, when you can do it the easy way by sucking up?

For the corporate go-getter, the 21C spot is merely a stepping stone to greater things. They use their time in the spot productively and produce great results. For those others, it is a career. They take out their deep-seated anger and frustration on those below them by exercising their power to control stationery supplies and the like.

DB: How many of these tips worked for you?

FA: While it is all written in fun and jest, many will notice there is a serious undercurrent to it.

Isn't it a terrible indictment on some areas of the corporate world that it could even faintly resemble the exaggerated, unethical, and downright dishonest behaviours described in the book?

Many wonder whether we are yet past the “greed is good” era.

I don't think so.

In a number of cases, the corporate duty to the shareholder is allowed to override any semblance of good corporate citizenship or remotely compassionate behaviour. We just feel better about it all now because we have elaborate mission statements and codes of conduct saying that everyone cares. As a famous philosopher once said: “Talk is cheap”.

I have consulted to companies where senior executives have said to me, “I know we have that mission statement and company values stuff, but we really want it to mean something—tell us where we fall short”. It is rare to see such a level of self-critical candour

at the upper levels of management. In these cases, management genuinely wanted the corporate PR statements to actually mean something, but appreciated that they fell short of the goal. They were interested enough to want to make meaningful strides towards that ideal.

DB: Why should people wanting to climb the corporate ladder take this advice?

FA: Because if they don't they will be trampled by the oncoming rush of those who do.

DB: Does it apply to women also?

FA: Women are now part of the corporate game more than they ever have been. But I think it would be naïve to think there was total equality across the board.

Having said that, I have witnessed a few women make it to the highest levels. But for every one who does, I am certain there are a large number who should have made it, but didn't. Generally, I think it is because they have chosen not to participate in the political BS that sometimes goes on. For that choice, while they may limit their careers, they probably end up with a more rewarding life overall. The reason for this is that they seek out other things to give them fulfilment and a balance that not many men are able to achieve.

DB: What advice do you have for women when they cannot network because of gender barriers (such as the golf course, the men's toilet, lap-dancing clubs and so on)?

FA: Stick-on beards and moustaches are only to be used as a last resort.

The corporate world is (and I think will continue to be) a largely “blokey” domain, with its machismo and hairy-chested bravado. That is not to say that it is an exclusively closed shop. But there aren't too many Carly Fiorinas in the world heading major multinational corporations. Having said that, I don't think her downfall was necessarily solely a gender thing, I think it was more the result of a misalignment of strategies.

The only advice to get ahead and break through the barriers is to demonstrate merit...demonstrate merit...demonstrate merit—until you can kick the door in and be noticed. The attitudes to women in the corporate world are certainly changing, but it is more of an evolutionary change, rather than a revolutionary one. Strictly speaking, that's not really good enough, but it is certainly a (slow) step in the right direction.

Sadly, to be noticed, women often have to work harder and produce far better results than the comparative male—this then produces the negative side effect of the male of the

species feeling threatened and needing to flex some muscle to prove his “true” superiority.

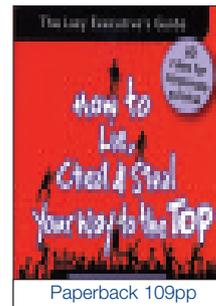
DB: What happens if someone fails the revision quiz at the back of the book?

FA: They will obviously have to start from scratch—with a fresh copy of the book, of course.

It has been proven in independent clinical trials that the book is far more effective when one works with a freshly purchased, unread copy.

DB: Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to talk with us.

FA: Busy? Yes, the queue I am in here at Centrelink has been quite long today...



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LAST WORD

The man who can make others laugh secures more votes for a measure than the man who forces them to think.

MALCOLM DE CHAZAL (1902-1981)

