

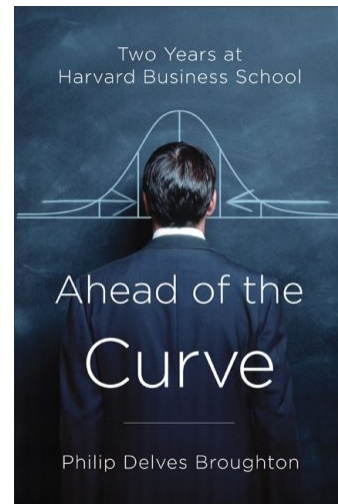
Ahead of the Curve: Two Years at Harvard Business School

Author Philip Delves Broughton

Reviewed by Paul Diamond, Web Editor, Vistage International

As the Paris bureau chief for London's *Daily Telegraph*, Philip Broughton felt somehow unfulfilled. His inclination towards business school came simply from his want to control his financial future. In 2004, at age 32, he moved his family from Paris to Boston, matriculating into Harvard Business School (HBS). As class began, so too did he begin chronicling his introduction to the inner workings of the business world and HBS--the bowels of international business pedagogy.

Journalists are professional observers, and the good ones are able to express their experiences and investigations in engaging, riveting ways that leave you questioning the status quo. Broughton's writing and questioning skills are evident, but as business school began his gross lack of business skills and corporate experience left him struggling to keep up with his classmates. Perhaps the book's title, [*Ahead of the Curve*](#), contains some irony.



The title really refers to Harvard's forced curve (from best to worst) grading system. Outside of the U.S. this book is titled less obscurely as: *What They Teach You at Harvard Business School: My Two Years in the Cauldron of Capitalism*.

Many CEOs can relate to the experience of suddenly being in over your head and needing to learn a new skill set in a hurry. This is the author's predicament throughout the book. But he doesn't just document his own learning curve, he questions everything that his professors attempt to teach him. It's as though he resists any new knowledge until he has had time to turn it over, examine it, point out the irony or build a rationale for it.

After Broughton learns about personality tests, and is forced to take one, he uncovers the absurd nature of bringing many different people together into one company, for one goal. He writes:

To most companies the idea of people as individuals is terrifying . . . what could be more frightening than trying to get thousands of different personalities through each working day without revolts, strikes, criminal subterfuge, and assault, let alone corralling their energies toward a money-making enterprise? . . . You can measure the efficiency of your machines, the accuracy of your accounting, and the returns on your investment. But then along comes your work force . . . beneath their suits and khakis your employees are an army of militants. Lepidopterists, poets, chess wizards, baritones, fantasists, whittlers, spankers, and Sudoku nuts. Animal lovers, gamblers, knitters, Episcopalians, Satanists,

gluttons, and cheats.

So you try to control them with the tools at your disposal: salaries, perks, promotions, sackings, ethical codes, mission statements, team-building exercises. And then someone comes along with a test that says every individual can be put into one of sixteen boxes and given a four-letter code that tells you what he is like, the kinds of tasks he will do well, and the kinds of people he will work best with. Well, Hallelujah!

When Broughton is not diving headforemost into the absurdity often overlooked in business, he's digging around the roots of his classmate's addiction to stress and obsession with wealth, drinking and status. His observations about the culture of HBS can cut to the core of our own business's culture or even our insecurities or lack of fulfillment as business leaders.

While the quality of his language and observations are exceptional, the book is not a traditional narrative with an unfolding drama, a dark hour for the narrator, followed by his eventual success. The book is more like real life, a chronicle of plodding through the days and lessons that make us smarter, better people.