

# Corporate Characters



Wulf Rehder

# Corporate Characters

52 Shades of Business



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For Carol  
Kai and Toki

“This book should either be required reading in every American corporation, or it should be forbidden. It contains too much truth.”

Email message from a vice president of a US corporation, responding to the first edition of this book, in 1989

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## The A-B-C of Corporate Characters

Some say that every man (and woman) belongs to one of two camps: the faculty of scientists or the fraternity of writers and artists. In the late 1800s, this dichotomy pitched Thomas Henry Huxley against Matthew Arnold, and in 1959, C.P. Snow coined the phrase of the “two cultures.” He described the rift as a breakdown of communication between the humanist tradition and the scientific worldview. The critic F. R. Leavis didn’t agree and called Snow’s thesis a “public relations” stunt for the sciences. The wealthy Templeton Foundation, in its ambition to mediate, has spent much grant money, including a lavishly endowed Templeton Prize, for interdisciplinary studies pacifying the two factions under the umbrella of Spirituality, in an attempt to reconcile the profits from the sciences with the promises of religion. Predictably, this ambitious effort has led to a motley crew of Prize winners, including Mother Teresa, Freeman Dyson, Billy Graham and Alvin Plantinga. In the groves of European academe, the French philosopher Hadot has tried to overcome Snow's chasm by depicting the two traditions, which he calls the *Promethean* and the *Orphic*, as autonomous but interdependent styles of reasoning about the world, a dual endeavor allegedly underway since Heraclitus. Over the years, several prominent intellectuals have offered their thoughts about a “third culture” bridging the divide identified by Snow. Examples of such diplomatic efforts can be found in publications by The Edge Foundation (see [edge.org](http://edge.org)). But alas! These efforts have only resulted in awkward compromises with titles like humanist sciences and scientific humanism.

The book in your hands is about a truly different third culture and its practitioners. I call them Corporate Characters. The intellectual noise and polemical dust created by the quibbling between scientific and literary men has obscured a simple fact: Just as every bar stool needs three legs in order to be stable, so have people since times immemorial relied on three pillars to stabilize their life: the above two, science and humanities, and a third one: business. While the modern-day protagonists for the sciences and humanities, professors, artists, writers, have been the subjects of much scholarship, the representative of business, the *homme d'affaires*, has so far been sorely neglected.

Uncovering this third basic style of thought and action is as important as Einstein's discovery of the warped universe as the third world system in addition to the "two Major Systems of the World" described by Galileo. Continuing this analogy, we might say that the Ptolemaic system corresponds to the traditional culture of the *homme des lettres*, while the Copernican revolution led to the enlightenment, which in turn hatched modern science. Several hundred years later, Einstein taught us his theory about curved space-time, which is the cosmological equivalent of the known fact that in business there are many crooked roads and detours based on the theory that time is money.

It is obvious that after the ages of Ptolemy and Copernicus, we now live squarely in the third culture, the age of business and economics. The businessman has truly arrived. From the sciences he carves his high-technology tools, from the arts he plucks his entertainment. The quest for eternal Truth and the search for heavenly Beauty has been replaced with the Law of Supply and Demand. Within this new framework, "what's true" has been demoted to "what's useful", and "what's beautiful" translates as "what's attractive." The new kind of ever-changing business "Truth" reflects the ups and downs of the stock market, and the new market-driven "Beauty" is as fickle as fashion.

Though it exploits the sciences and the arts, our current business culture can no longer simply be defined in terms of the two older “two Major Systems of the World.” Business stands proudly by itself, and its practitioners must be portrayed and judged on their own merit.

Such a phenomenology of Corporate Characters has been attempted in the book you are about to read. It was inspired by Theophrastus' book *Characters*, written some twenty-three centuries ago, and by Elias Canetti's whimsical psychological types portrayed in *Earwitness: Fifty Characters* (1979, originally published in German in 1974). Two of Theophrastus' characters, the Loquacious and the Busybody, freely translated and suitably adapted, are included in this collection of Corporate Characters. Through personal experience, wide ranging interviews, and bookish (though very enjoyable) research, I have found that all those wild and wily, tame and timid, high and mighty inmates of a contemporary business bestiary can be described within a systematic framework that derives its unique language and defining concepts from just three sources: Americana, Biblica, and Classica, the A-B-C of business culture. By Americana, I mean, for instance, the folk tales of John Henry, the Constitution, and the economic philosophy of Henry David Thoreau. Under Biblica, I count references to biblical stories and their heroes such as Moses and his field managers. Finally, Classica allude to the root of American business in Shakespeare's plays and, farther back still, to the Athenian water cooler, where greenhorns listened to Socrates holding forth.

This portfolio of business archetypes contains 52 snapshots of corporate characters, one for each week in the fiscal year, or one for each card in a full deck. Previous profiles of the businessman, from Mencken to Galbraith, associate him with the hangman and the scavenger and make him the uncultured brute that revels in private affluence and causes public squalor. True, he shares these properties with other socially accepted rogues: bandits, tort lawyers, and slumlords, all of whom argue for the sovereignty of private means

over public ends. But while these rascallions have been portrayed in books and even in blockbuster pictures, from *The Firm* to *The Sopranos* and Michael Moore's movies, corporate characters have never been featured as representatives of a well-defined third culture.

This collection is not intended as the businessman's apotheosis. Neither will you read an apology for his deeds, nor an outright condemnation of his attitudes. As Arthur Miller said about Willy Loman, "He's not the finest character that ever lived." That is true; but he is also not the worst. Navigating his ambivalent morality has prevented him from ever being really evil or truly good, outrageously funny or shockingly silly. The world of business is largely an irony-free zone. Countering this sorry state of corporate humor, I have, in describing this world, used many literary tropes, such as analogy, simile, metaphor, parody, caricature and even slapstick, all meant to paint an intrinsically gray terrain in brighter colors.

"It seems," wrote Isaac Bashevis Singer, "that the analysis of character is the highest human entertainment. And literature does it, unlike gossip, without mentioning real names." Therefore, no businessman will be mentioned by name, unless it was necessary for the plot or the joke I wanted to make.

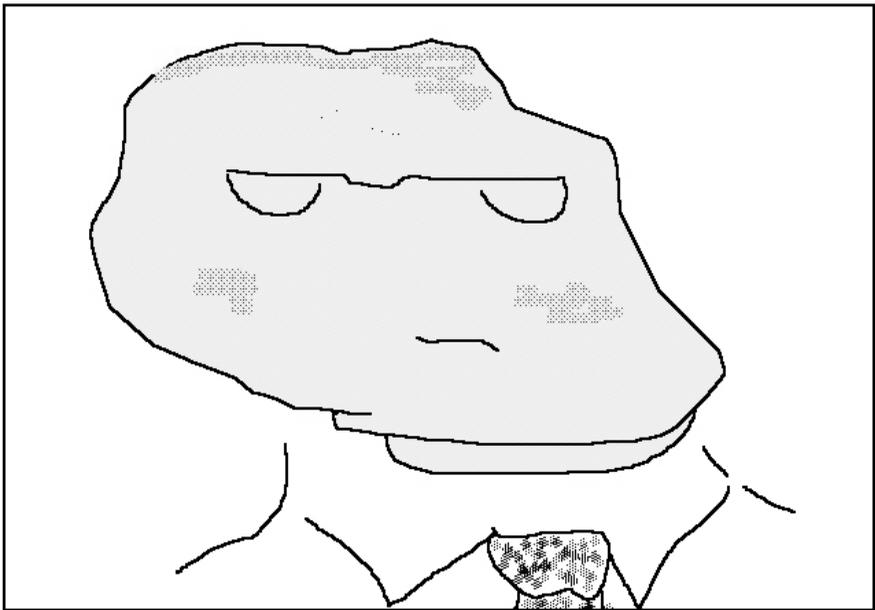
I  
Elementary Characters



## The Chief Executive Officer, or CEO

The CEO shares with the Pope the gift of infallibility, and with Moses the certainty that his corporate objectives, a.k.a. commandments, are of a divine origin. He commands a posse of cardinals and bishops, his vice presidents. They make up his cabinet, they have a *portefeuille*, a post and responsibilities, and they believe in the motto that the Marquis de Lafayette lived by: “Think little, but firmly!”

The CEO, however, must think much, and he must think big.



Money is the first item within the categories of “much” and “big.” There is a sign on the CEO’s desk that says, “The Buck Stops Here.” This defiant instruction may seem like a sly reference to the dog named Buck in Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*, who, as everyone remembers, becomes (at the end of the book) the pack’s alpha

wolf. More likely, though, it hints at the CEO's pay: Hardly a dollar shall pass beyond this desk without a part of it being pocketed by him. Indeed, the salary of a CEO is usually given in six figures or more, while his philosophy can be expressed in only six words. They were written in a letter by the Roman philosopher Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD) to his friend Lucilius:

*Cum ad summum perveneris, paria sunt.*

*When you are at the summit, everybody else looks equal.*

Or in the CEO's own vernacular:

*To the top dog everybody else is just a dog.*

Alpha comes before Beta and Gamma. Looking from his corner office down upon the masses of Beta directors and managers and Gamma employees toiling in cubicles, he can see that some of them are more unequal than others. How many lives of unequals depend on him? He roughly knows, but doesn't care. In this, he follows the poet Ovid (43 BC - 18 AD), who wrote that numbers are only for the pauper:

*Pauperis est numerare pecus.*

*Only the poor man counts his cattle.*

The pay for the employed cattle, properly called their *pecuniary* reward (from *pecus* - cattle), is only a skinny fraction of the CEO's, by a factor of 10 or 50. That's because they are remunerated for their work only, and as "at will" employees they can be severed from the company for cause or without rhyme or reason. By comparison, the CEO, who doesn't labor but lead, has a fat severance package, which is, in legal terms, his prenup with the company as his bride.

In his free time he plays golf (a double-digit handicap, in spite of multiple Mulligans), and on Saturday nights he sometimes accompanies his wife to the symphonic orchestra, for which they have season tickets. He is, in his own words, "very open to good music."

His favorites include Mozart's "Night Serenade" and Johann Strauss Jr.'s "Emperor's Waltz." From his days of courtship he also remembers Maurice Ravel's "Bolero," but he is not sure anymore in which context those pulsing rhythms once seemed relevant. Of American music he cherishes most Aaron Copeland's *Rodeo*, "Buckeroo Holiday" being his absolute favorite, because they always play it at his Equestrian Club. During the day he sometimes taps his fingers to Muzak's elevator music. That, for him, is a successful distillation of tonal happiness wrapped in non-threatening arrangements. Once he read in the *Wall Street Journal* that Muzak (together with Andy Warhol's cans of Campbell soup) is our post-industrial life's most authentic art form, because it is endlessly repeatable and non-offensive. Whatever the pundits say, it calms him down.

Buying two outrageously expensive glasses of champagne during intermission shows the CEO's cultural commitment to the arts, and a plaque in the lobby of the Symphony Hall is proof of his responsibilities as a corporate sponsor and benefactor of cultural causes. He generously admits that he is not a specialist in music or art. No, he has no critical opinion about Wyeth's "Helga" pictures, for instance. But, personally, he likes her blond and naive nakedness. Yes, he certainly knows what he likes.

His PR department realizes how important it is that the CEO will be seen during the correct fund raising events. The Science Center and the Opera House are great photo opportunities, United Way campaigns and Retirement Home openings are OK. Pro Choice events, Aids Awareness rallies, and Gay Pride parades are definite no-no's. He prefers to read about these controversial gatherings in the safe, square, and self-confident prose of the *Wall Street Journal*.

Since graduating from Business School he has been a conservative, staunch in the defense of tax breaks, but less dogmatic with regards to environmental policy loopholes. He owns a gun (but has

never used it) – for him it’s a matter of principle in support of the Second Amendment. Justices and judges, he says, should be umpires and never pitch or bat. He has voted Republican since his second year in college, but Trump makes him uncomfortable. He has said he would never employ Ted Cruz, because he would give our customers the creeps.