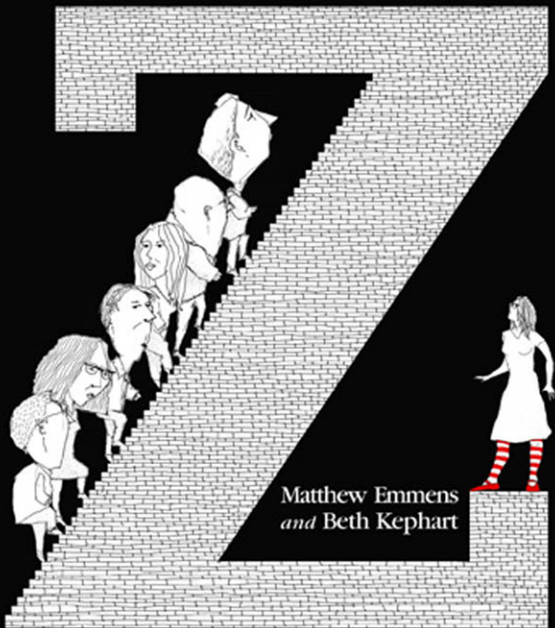


# ZENOBIA

## The Curious Book of Business

A Tale of Triumph Over Yes-Men, Cynics,  
Hedgers, and Other Corporate Killjoys



an excerpt from

***Zenobia:  
The Curious Book of Business***

by Matthew Emmens and Beth Kephart  
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## PREFACE

### **What is Zenobia?**

Is it a strange place? Is it a prescription? A simple fantasy?

Certainly those seeking a series of straightforward steps to business success would do better to journey elsewhere, for Zenobia is a place of twists and turns, unexpected encounters and surprise. Certainly those who depend on politics and hierarchy to propel their careers to a “higher” place won’t find any of that here.

Zenobia is, instead, for people who recognize that corporate life is very much an adventure—a place where the imagination can open the most extraordinary doors. It’s for people who dare to assert their own best thinking where they work and who dare to let their business environment stir positive change within them.

I’ve spent more than thirty years in business, working my way through its various channels as a sales representative, a marketing manager, and a senior executive. I’ve spent time at established multinationals like Merck & Co., and I’ve had the privilege of

helping to launch wholly new organizations such as Astra Merck and EMD Pharmaceuticals. Throughout it all I've observed that the people who are most successful at what they do are the ones who embrace the wild rise and fall of the adventure—who find energy in risk, opportunity in the unknown, and possibility in the people all around them. Those who succeed compete with their colleagues, not against them. They view their organizations not as overwhelming, impersonal, implacable forces but as places where they have the chance to influence positive outcomes. They recognize that, while companies are defined by market value, earnings per share, assets, processes, and intellectual property, succeeding rests in the hands of people.

Success is not an absolute measure; it's the goal each employee sets for himself or herself. Those who succeed name their objectives and then seek out a path—asking for help where they need help, leveraging the expertise of others, and choosing to lead by their own example, no matter where they are “ranked,” no matter how they are titled. Those who succeed are not afraid to bring their true human selves to the job every day—their talents, their anxieties, their pride, their toil, their determination, their humility, their empathy for others, their willingness to take

on challenges, assume risks, push beyond known boundaries, and, most importantly, believe in something that is not yet there. Those who succeed aren't afraid to fail, for failure is only, in the end, a chance to grow and learn.

Adventure stories have the rub of the familiar about them; we read them to our children and we remember having had them read to us. In their pages we meet those rousing heroes and heroines who face scary obstacles and take memorable risks while encountering enemies and finding unexpected allies. We learn again that fears must be overcome if the extraordinary is to be achieved, and by the end of these tales, the extraordinary usually happens. Adventure stories have been told for eons. So why have we failed to apply them to business?

*Zenobia: The Curious Book of Business* is designed to take you on an adventure—to transport you to a place where even the most crumbling structures and stubborn personalities are transformed by the enthusiasm, conviction, and courage of the story's heroine. What is strange here will quite quickly become familiar. It will, we hope, inspire you to change the way you view your own world of work—to take what already is and transform it into what must be. For only the cre-

## ZENOBIA

ative and the courageous can lead change. Only passion can turn ruin into rightness and transform work itself into something more like fun.

Zenobia is a mythical place, a place where the heroine's adventure becomes a pathway to success for others. It is, as well, a mystical place—a place that reminds us all that one's own success can be achieved only when others succeed as well.

Curious indeed.

Matthew Emmens

Wayne, Pennsylvania

January 2008

*Now I shall tell of the city of Zenobia, which is wonderful in this fashion: though set on dry terrain it stands on high pilings, and the houses are of bamboo and zinc, with many platforms and balconies placed on stilts at various heights, crossing one another, linked by ladders and hanging sidewalks, surmounted by cone-roofed belvederes, barrels storing water, weather vanes, jutting pulleys, and fish poles, and cranes.*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

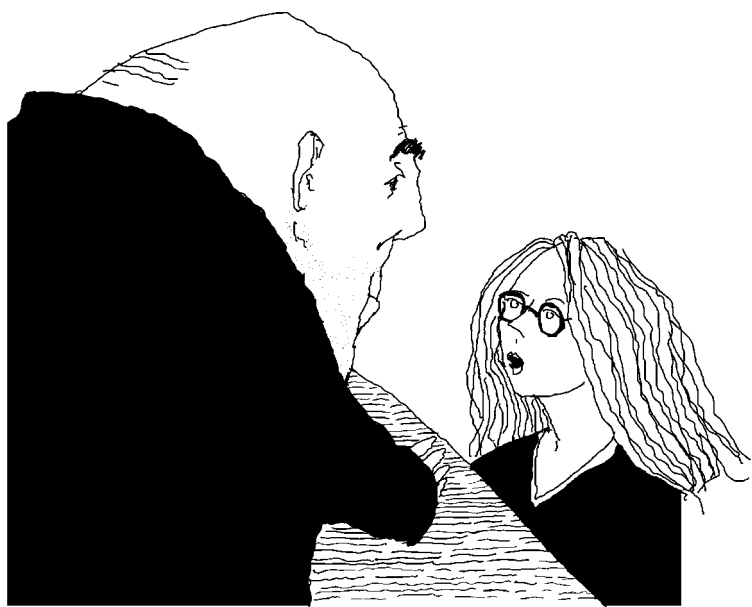


# 1

## MAKE OF THE UNKNOWN AN ADVENTURE

**T**here was, to begin, no apparent way up. The doors of the elevators had been sealed long ago. The stairs zinged this way and that, crossed over and through, circled back and endlessly in. Some enterprising soul had thrown a ladder up, but it was perched at a delirious angle. Someone had tried to launch a lavender kite, but its tail sagged sadly around the balustrade. There were precarious rope bridges tethered across the atrium. There were tunnels threaded east and also north. There were doors that were locked, there were rooms with no lights, there were windows blackened over, sealed shut. Hardly ever did the old phones ring. At Zenobia there was trouble.

“Excuse me,” Moira said, for she was new to this place and she had only just now made her way from



her car, across the moat, to the guard at the turnstile. “How do I find room 133A?” She was wearing red shoes and a neat woolen dress. She was thinking about something her sister once said: *No one has ever seen a black hole straight on. The evidence has forever been entirely indirect.* Moira always remembered her sister’s best instructions at opportune times, for her sister was an astronomer who knew darkness as well as light.

“Room 133A?” repeated the guard, after mulling the question for a surprising stretch. “Room 133A follows 132B and precedes 135C. And just for the record, there’s no 134 nor, to my knowledge, a 135A or B. But that last part is just between you and me,” he said, lowering his voice. “Tell no one that I told you.”

Moira pushed her round glasses up the bridge of her nose, flipped back her bangs, and took in the scene—the ropey overpasses and crooked stairs, the forlorn kite tail, the smudge-colored tunnels. Arrows pointed in a thousand directions, but there was no way of divining their meaning. For whom had those arrows been hung and painted? Moira wondered. And when? It seemed to her to be some kind of code, the sort of thing a lucky archeologist might find in a pre-historic cave.

“But which way,” Moira said, hoping to be clearer this time, “might I go to find room 133A?”

“I’ve told you enough,” the guard said sulkily, as if he’d been asked that question a thousand times before. “Much more than enough for one day.”

Moira glanced at her watch. It was 8:10. The classified ad that had brought her to this place had presented but two key instructions: find room 133A and arrive no later than 9:00 a.m. That was it—no interview, no references, no vetting of her credentials—just a time and a room number. She had recently left a job that had bored her to tears. She had promised herself an adventure. This sounds appealingly odd, she had said to herself. But odd is one thing, somewhat mild. Zenobia, so far, was quite strange. Nevertheless, she boldly entered—through the turnstile, straight into the atrium.

“Thanks for your help,” Moira told the guard, and, reluctantly, he buzzed her in. Taking a left, Moira started walking. This would be, she decided, like finding her way through the night. And she had practice at that, the sort of grit that comes from years of persevering. She had, with glasses on, the keenest pair of eyes. She could see through mess and muddle. She could see what wasn’t there.

## 2

# TAKE CARE, LEST YOUR SUCCESS LEAD TO RUIN

**H**ow long had it been like this—always threatening to rain? How long had Zenobia been the color of smog and mud? Long ago, Zenobians had taken to dressing for the gloomiest of weather, and the fashion had prevailed. They had taken to their jobs as if taking to chores—reacting and surrendering and sighing to themselves, keeping their eyes in a miserable squint. The place had lost its sense of humor. It had no zeal, no passion.

Here's what would happen to any idea that got suggested: it would be ignored, snuffed out, or flattened. Here's what Zenobians thought about risk: not here, not now, not ever. Here's how Zenobians would go about their days: with blinders on and chins tucked in, with one eye on the clock. Revenues, of course, were

flat. Profits were perpetually falling. Not an ounce of polish was on any surface. Innovation was the purest abstraction.

From where he sat, in his room above it all, Gallagher appraised and contemplated. He had the thick, white hair of a seasoned man but the physical grace of a former athlete—a gymnast, perhaps, or a tennis player. He'd been with Zenobia through its heady days of ascent and also during the miracle of its heyday. He'd thought, at one point, that he'd make it into one of the clubs, but to him the doors were never opened. He'd been good old Gallagher, reliable old Gallagher, when-you-need-something-fixed-go-to-Gallagher Gallagher. He'd been passed over time and again but always gently. *We need you where you are, old boy. You shift, and we all crumble.* He'd put off his wife, who wanted him to come home, who pointed out, almost every night, that his colleagues were off on perpetual vacations and that other wives, married to other husbands, were having a whole lot more fun in their lives.

Stubborn, increasingly isolated, Gallagher proffered initiatives that had advanced precisely nothing. His attempt to lift the stultifying strictures had deepened the prevailing paranoia. His suggestion that the execu-



tives who had not yet parachuted out convene to chart a course for the future had been rebuffed. Gallagher's memos on change had gone unread. He found copies of them scattered in trash cans. Once he brought in a spare kite from home and looped it around a tarnished railing, the kite being suggestive to him of the bold and serendipitous, the kite being—maybe?—an inspiration. But if anyone had caught wind of it, they hadn't been inspired. They'd all gone around with their eyes cast down, with their shoe soles thin, in their treacherous trench coat fashions.

“Retire,” Gallagher's wife kept pressing. “Please. Come home and start a garden. Why give yourself away to those who cannot know what you are giving? What is the point of wanting a change when no one wants the change with you? What is the purpose of your heroism, Gallagher, when no one's taking notice from above?”



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