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Run To Failure: BP And The Making Of The Deepwater Horizon Disaster



Synopsis

It was Big Oil's nightmare moment, and the dominoes began falling years before the well was drilled. Two decades ago, British Petroleum, a venerable and storied corporation, was running out of oil reserves. Along came a new CEO of vision and vast ambition, John Browne, who pulled off one of the greatest corporate turnarounds in history. BP bought one company after another and then relentlessly fired employees and cut costs. It skipped safety procedures, pumped toxic chemicals back into the ground, and let equipment languish, even while Browne claimed a new era of environmentally sustainable business as his own. For a while the strategy worked, making BP one of the most profitable corporations in the world. Then it all began to unravel, in felony convictions for environmental crimes and in one deadly accident after another. Employees and regulators warned that BP's problems, unfixed, were spinning out of control, that another disaster - bigger and deadlier - was inevitable. Nobody was listening. Having reported on business and the energy industry for nearly a decade, Abraham Lustgarten uses interviews with key executives, former government investigators, and whistle-blowers along with his exclusive access to BP's internal documents and emails to weave a spellbinding investigative narrative of hubris and greed well before the gulf oil spill.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

How a culture of corner-cutting and wishful-thinking spawned a disaster in offshore drilling[Review published in MIT's The Tech]The horrifying image of a muddy column of oil rushing incessantly from

the earth's guts into the deep blue waters of the Gulf is forever branded in my memory. As I watched in disbelief the live video feed from the bottom of the sea, showing the Macondo well vomiting poison into the ocean, week after week, impervious to the incompetent attempts of BP to kill it, there was one question that kept bouncing in my head: how on earth did this happen? Abraham Lustgarten, an award-winning environmental journalist and recipient of the MacArthur Foundation's "genius grant," has the answer. His devastating exposé of BP's abysmal safety record details the role the company played in what is arguably the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history. Run to Failure, Lustgarten's recent book, deconstructs how the Deepwater Horizon "accident" was decades in the making, how short-sighted managerial decisions led to a culture where rhetoric ("safety remains our number one priority") cloaked sloppy operations for the sake of profit. The story unfolds like a train wreck in slow-motion, from the rise of John Browne as The One inside British Petroleum in the late 1980s to the moment Andrea Fleytas radioed "Mayday!" from a burning platform in the Gulf on the night of April 20, 2010. The conclusion is as damning as it is terrifying: The great 2010 oil spill was the direct result of BP's quick and dirty approach to business. And although it was utterly avoidable, a similar or worse disaster may happen again. Although Lustgarten divides his book formally into three parts, it makes more sense to think of it in two blocks.

At one level this book is a great history of the events leading to the disaster in the Gulf; however, its real message is the increasing danger posed by quarterly results driven management management by mandate. Although not highlighted in the book, the way too close relationships forged by former politicians and political administrators is apparent from a deeper read. The book documents a cultural fixation on short term earnings with little regard towards safety or long term profits. Operating, maintenance and quality control budgets were routinely subverted to the need for reportable earnings. On the north slope it meant neglect or the corrosion management and inspection programs and operating shortcuts in the oilfields. The highly predictable results were higher worker injury rates, pipeline failures and ultimately huge expenses to repair damage that could have been prevented. Unfortunately today far too many senior managers are slaves to budgets that are driven from the top. It's not just the oil industry, across America you can see examples of how short term cost cutting is sacrificing long term interests. It's not just corporation but schools, governments, utilities and others have allowed the infrastructure to decay to the point of added costs and risks. An interesting contrast to the culture of BP is our military. Young Marine officers are taught to listen to their non-commissioned officers. The Gunny (Sargent) is one of the most respected members of the Corps. Gen Colin Powell had a great presentation on management

in which one of these rules was to believe the people in the field (rather than headquarters) in the absence of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

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