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## THE MAGAZINE July–August 2010

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# How Will You Measure Your Life?

by Clayton M. Christensen

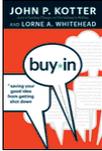
*Editor's Note: When the members of the class of 2010 entered business school, the economy was strong and their post-graduation ambitions could be limitless. Just a few weeks later, the economy went into a tailspin. They've spent the past two years recalibrating their worldview and their definition of success.*

*The students seem highly aware of how the world has changed (as the sampling of views in this article shows). In the spring, Harvard Business School's graduating class asked HBS professor Clay Christensen to address them—but not on how to apply his principles and thinking to their post-HBS careers. The students wanted to know how to apply them to their personal lives. He shared with them a set of guidelines that have helped him find meaning in his own life. Though Christensen's thinking comes from his deep religious faith, we believe that these are strategies anyone can use. And so we asked him to share them with the readers of HBR. To learn more about Christensen's work, visit his [HBR Author Page](#).*

Before I published [The Innovator's Dilemma](#), I got a call from Andrew Grove, then the chairman of Intel. He had read one of my early papers about disruptive technology, and he asked if I could talk to his direct reports and explain my research and what it implied for Intel. Excited, I flew to Silicon Valley and showed up at the appointed time, only to have Grove say, "Look, stuff has happened. We have only 10 minutes for you. Tell us what your model of disruption means for Intel." I said that I couldn't—that I needed a full 30 minutes to explain the model, because only with it as context would any comments about Intel make sense. Ten minutes into my explanation, Grove interrupted: "Look, I've got your model. Just tell us what it means for Intel."

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I insisted that I needed 10 more minutes to describe how the process of disruption had worked its way through a very different industry, steel, so that he and his team could understand how disruption worked. I told the story of how Nucor and other steel minimills had begun by attacking the lowest end of the market—steel reinforcing bars, or rebar—and later moved up toward the high end, undercutting the traditional steel mills.

When I finished the minimill story, Grove said, “OK, I get it. What it means for Intel is...,” and then went on to articulate what would become the company’s strategy for going to the bottom of the market to launch the Celeron processor.

I’ve thought about that a million times since. If I had been suckered into telling Andy Grove what he should think about the microprocessor business, I’d have been killed. But instead of telling him what to think, I taught him how to think—and then he reached what I felt was the correct decision on his own.

That experience had a profound influence on me. When people ask what I think they should do, I rarely answer their question directly. Instead, I run the question aloud through one of my models. I’ll describe how the process in the model worked its way through an industry quite different from their own. And then, more often than not, they’ll say, “OK, I get it.” And they’ll answer their own question more insightfully than I could have.

My class at HBS is structured to help my students understand what good management theory is and how it is built. To that backbone I attach different models or theories that help students think about the various dimensions of a general manager’s job in stimulating innovation and growth. In each session we look at one company through the lenses of those theories—using them to explain how the company got into its situation and to examine what managerial actions will yield the needed results.

On the last day of class, I ask my students to turn those theoretical lenses on themselves, to find cogent answers to three questions: First, how can I be sure that I’ll be happy in my career? Second, how can I be sure that my relationships with my spouse and my family become an enduring source of happiness? Third, how can I be sure I’ll stay out of jail? Though the last question sounds lighthearted, it’s not. Two of the 32 people in my Rhodes scholar class spent time in jail. Jeff Skilling of Enron fame was a classmate of mine at HBS. These were good guys—but something in their lives sent them off in the wrong direction.

#### [The Class of 2010](#)

As the students discuss the answers to these questions, I open my own life to them as a case study of sorts, to illustrate how they can use the theories from our course to guide their life decisions.

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