

A Year of Mondays 2018

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God save us from Experts

One of the best songs from the recent movie *The Greatest Showman* is titled "Never Enough." The title sums up a key point about experts. We do need experts around us to help grow personally and professionally, but expertise alone is never enough.

My alma mater for business school, the Thunderbird School for Global Management, was crawling with experts in marketing, organizational design, strategy, competitive analysis, financial management and any other business discipline you care to name. The school's Board of Directors also included luminaries from the business and political world. Their combined expertise was not enough. The school finally ended up being rolled into ASU-a shadow of its former globally-admired self.

To maintain and grow organizations we need more than smarts.

This past year, both the business and political worlds have been rocked by sexual harassment scandal after scandal. This despite legions of sexual harassment experts (both external consultants and internal HR staff) and millions spent in training. It was never enough.

Experts can give us a safe feeling. We might feel that an issue has been "covered." (As if one executive briefing, a training module, or a colorful slide deck fixes a problem.)

If expertise is not enough, what else do we need? Here are a few to consider:

- Accountability in the right place. Just as Finance is not responsible for financial results, HR is not responsible for people results. In the sexual harassment scandals, the related scandal is the years that it took boards and peers of these leaders to take any action.

- Interest in serving needs of the organization and not just your slice of it. One client calls that wearing the jersey. One of my mentors, Alan Weiss, calls it “having a heart to help.”
- A bias for action. Once we get the information from an expert we should be asking “so what.” As in “so what are we going to do about it?”

Do surround yourself with smart people, but also remember expertise alone is “never enough.” Healthy organizations require more. More accountability. More interest in helping. More action. Experts alone might just be like a soft pillow on the face of an organization.

Cold Turkey Does Make a Great Sandwich

“Cold Turkey is getting stale and I’m eating crow...” -Green Day, Hitchin’ a Ride

New Year’s resolutions get a bad rap. People say they don’t work. The truth is we need more resolutions. Not more in terms of quantity, but more in terms of being repetitively resolute. We need more resolve.

A new year’s resolution is best thought of as 365 daily resolutions. If you screw up, slack off, or otherwise fall off the wagon, then get back on it, daily. Resist the temptation to make the excuse that because I screwed up and went back to habits I don’t want, that it makes sense to quit now. Stay future focused and repetitively resolute.

If the holidays teach us anything it’s that Cold Turkey does make a great sandwich, and it is dramatically better than eating crow at the end of the year.

Upon Further Review

I am grateful for the last several months of college football. There have been great games and great plays. The great plays are almost always reviewed. I’m glad they do it—it’s important to get the facts right. Leaders need that discipline too. As much as possible we need to use original sources of information.

Here’s a couple ideas to consider:

- **Don’t rely on others descriptions of information.** A newscaster may describe a twitter post as a “rant.” Read it yourself and decide. I recently found a boring news network. It was refreshingly non-sensational (boring) like news used to be: x happened and here are the details.
- **Don’t over-rely on the wisdom of other people’s quotes, even the good ones.** One of my favorite quotes is Marshall Goldsmith’s “what got

you here won't get you there." He means that for many leaders the behaviors and traits that provided prior success may not guarantee success in the next role. Maybe, but what about traits like determination, drive, and low tolerance for small thinking? Try making some of your own quotes.

- **Don't buy into the shallow dogma of others.** LinkedIn has a particularly rich vein of daily platitudes that are largely useless for successful leaders. What is servant leadership anyway? Is it really required for success or is it a preference for how some people want to conduct themselves?
- **Don't take other people's assessment as a fact.** This is especially prevalent with performance reviews and 360s. If someone says "so and so is not a team player", what is their evidence? The statement itself is not evidence. Create an eye for detection of behaviors, not judgments.

As leaders were surrounded with data and are trusted to make great decisions. As much as possible we need to go back to the source to really understand the data and boost the quality of those decisions.

Utility Costs

Utility in economic terms is the value a person gets from the use of something. If we use something a lot, we get high utility value. If we use something little, then there is low utility value. The most expensive suit or dress a person will buy will be the one they never wear. No utilization equals loss of value.

Often people invest in upgrading their house just before putting it on the market. It makes sense because they want top dollar, but they lose utility. The new buyer gets the full utility (enjoyment) of the new kitchen and the seller does not. What if they had upgraded the kitchen a year earlier? They would have enjoyed a year of utility and increased the potential market value of the home.

The same thing can happen when leaders consider investments in their business. I spoke to a leader who was taking over an organization. When I suggested he consider best practices to best to get the team off to a great start, he said he wanted to grow "organically." In practice that means let's take a wait and see approach. Spending time waiting and seeing how things might turn out organically (i.e. by chance) gives up the utility of a better performing team over time. What value was missed? Who knows, but it is likely substantial.

Utility is important when we think about when to invest in people. It is tempting to put off those investments "until the time is right." Yet it is best to

invest in top people sooner than later. Investing in the top performers is not only a great way to help inoculate them against talent poachers, but can also greatly improve impact on the organization through improved utility.

You are in the Army now, Beetle Bailey

Beetle Bailey has been a popular comic strip in the US since 1951. The strip was the creation of Mort Walker who died this weekend at the age of 94. According to the WSJ obituary, it was a close thing that Beetle stayed in syndication. Early on the strip was not very popular and was about to be cancelled. The syndication executives suggested that Mr. Walker make an adjustment: have Beetle join the Army. Yes at the beginning, Beetle Bailey was a civilian.

I found this story interesting because it highlights the fact that small shifts can create great value.

Mr. Walker really had little choice to change. The comic strip was likely to be cancelled if he did not do something. Luckily the something that was suggested played to his strengths. Mr. Walker was able create new story lines, new characters (can you imagine Beetle Bailey without a Sarge??), and on-going situations that people found relatable and interesting. The shift made the comic strip a big success.

There are lots of ways to shift, but one might start thinking about them in the following categories: who, what and how.

We can shift the WHO, or how we define ourselves. I recently attended a panel discussion of three CEOs of oil companies. One of the biggest takeaways for me is that these companies are starting to define themselves as manufacturers versus extractors. This is an enormous shift. One CEO said they will increase production four times, but “we are not going to grow our workforce four times.” Can you imagine all the changes that come with thinking like a manufacturer instead of thinking like an extractor? Certainly less “drill baby, drill.”

We can shift a WHAT, or the attention we give to some things over others. A CEO I know has the opportunity to create enormous value in his organization if the organization executes on just one area of opportunity this year. All other projects could deliver average results, but if this singular project gets done it will transform the company. On what should he focus?

We can shift the HOW. One client company has identified HOW they get their objectives done as just as important as what they are getting done. The reason

is that their current leadership style is rough on the furniture which slows down execution and creates roadblocks in the organization.

Are there shifts that can be made in your organization? Is the shift a who, what or how? Something else? If it shifted, what value could be created? If Beetle could make a move, perhaps you can too.

They Diagnose Well and Cure Badly

“They diagnose well and cure badly” was a quote from a recent interview with Lech Walesa, Nobel Peace prize winner and former president of Poland. He was commenting on the current Polish government’s moves away from what they call “western-style democracy.”

It is not uncommon in politics or business for people to identify a worthy problem, but still adopt a lousy solution. Witness the recent support for a Universal Basic Income from “tech titans” concerned with disruptions from innovations on incomes of US workers.

In organizations we will see “lack of effective teaming” addressed with “retreats” and pizza parties. We see “gaps in future leadership skills” addressed by “leadership training”—the success of which is measured by the participants’ surveys of presenters versus actual change in behaviors, skills or output. We see organizations driving for innovation by using stand-alone continuous improvement committees with no emphasis on adoption and outside the purview of actual P&L owners. We see safety programs focused on the behavior of field workers without holding supervisors appropriately accountable.

These examples all show focus on important problems, but offer poor solutions.

“Bad cures” will often have at least these two common failings:

1. Mis-placed responsibility. Place the responsibility where it belongs and make sure that all key players have skin in the game. How in the world can we have innovation without some incentive for P&L owners?
2. Focus on activity versus an outcome. Too many organizational activities focus on something be done. We “did” an assessment. We “did” a survey. We “did” a strategy session. Move from “did” to measurable impact.

Be on alert for bad cures. While it is true that prescription without diagnosis is malpractice, it is also true that all prescriptions are not equal.

“Calling BS” is not as valuable as People Think

People are often quite proud of their ability to frankly “call BS” in a situation. In fact, “calling BS” is neither a very high-value nor uncommon skill. Taking a situation from “BS” to “no-S” IS a high value skill and a lot less common.

Going through the Motions

At my gym, I see frequent examples of people going through the motions—one, in particular, is a stand-out. On three occasions I have seen a guy park his car in the handicap spot, walk inside, hand his membership card to check in with the front desk attendant, continue to the opposite side of the reception desk, continue to the exit, get back in his car, and drive away. This man is clearly going the through the motions. I am sure that attendance data must be of value to him somehow, but certainly not for his fitness.

We need to worry less about what people think. If we are going through the motions, then we need to highlight who are we trying to please. Is there feedback we need to give them now to renegotiate on a commitment? There is enough face-saving in the world already. Are there any activities you are doing just to look better? What options do you have to do something that is actually going to make a difference in what you care about?

I am a firm believer that people have unlimited creativity, but limited energy. Going through the motions is an energy zapper. We owe it to ourselves to free up some of that energy and get moving on things we care about.

Not in my Wheelhouse only Works on Big Boats

My buddy and I went to happy hour at a local pizza joint recently. A young man greeted us at the door and took us to a table. It being early, I asked him about happy hour. He replied, “That’s not really in my wheelhouse. I will have the bartender tell you about it.” The bartender was nearly his equal in unhelpfulness; he silently pointed to a TV screen behind him. When I suggested to the bartender that he just tell me, he said that most people just like to read it themselves. Luckily, and before it got ugly, our waitress appeared and was both helpful and informed. She explained their simple happy hour in about 45 seconds. Two beers later I was about calmed down.

There really are people with an extremely narrow band of helpfulness—and it can kill a business.

Compare the experience above to my wife's trip to a local bakery. She asked at the counter if they have gluten-free bread. The person replied: "I bake it on Tuesdays." The baker was both informed and helpful.

We need more ownership these days. Don't let people in your business make things too complicated or add in extra layers of bureaucracy. And never accept that wheelhouse garbage unless your ship is really quite big.

Jeff Immelt's GE "Success Theater"

The last several months have been tough for GE. Once one of the most respected companies in the US, it has seen its stock crater in a year when almost every other major stock is rising. Much of the blame is being focused on past CEO, Jeff Immelt. According to a WSJ article, critics say he and his executive team were way too rosy in their projections and displayed a stubborn resistance to new information—a habit described by insiders as "success theater."

Leaders can be tempted to put on a show of success in lots of different situations including:

A new merger or acquisition

A new (significant) hire

A new strategic initiative

An heir apparent for future leadership positions

Optimism is an essential element of success, but being overly (blindly) optimistic in the face of new information or shifting circumstances is a recipe for disaster. Just ask Jeff.

Fun Fact versus Pertinent Fact

I once met with a SVP to discuss coaching for one of his leaders. He stated that he always liked to ask this question at "interviews": who would you most like to have dinner with on a deserted island? He was asking for a fun fact when he should have been looking for a pertinent fact.

My polite (but unnecessary) answer to his question was a famous modern Japanese novelist who committed suicide by seppuku.* The pertinent fact was

that I was qualified to help his leader and had prior success with many other leaders.

People confuse fun facts with pertinent facts all the time. It is a bad habit.

Fun fact: The team does not get together socially.

Pertinent fact: There is no alignment among senior leaders on strategic focus.

Fun fact: The organization supplies leadership training to hundreds of “high potentials” every year.

Pertinent fact: Supervisors of said “high potentials” do not follow up on the application of the leadership training consistently.

Here’s another pertinent fact: the amount of time spent on pertinent facts versus fun facts is positively correlated with success.

*you get “fun fact points” for correctly naming this novelist

Roger Bannister breaking the 4 minute myth

Saturday, Roger Bannister passed away at the age of 88. He was the first recorded human to run a mile in less than four minutes. Thinking of the time was that the human body might just be incapable of the feat. The prior record of 4:01.4 had stood for nine years. As a scientist, Bannister said he was convinced that the limit was not physical but psychological. He proved the limit was a myth.

Great achievements often have the effect of giving permission to other people to aspire to replicate or improve on the achievement. Mr. Bannister’s record only stood for 46 days when his time was surpassed by his rival, John Landy. Yet, Mr. Bannister has inspired others to challenge the myths of their barriers and keep setting higher standards, and that is something we can all do.

Don’t Broadcast Static, Broadcast Change

Many times you can tell when a new assessment is being used in an organization because the results become part of the décor. People take strengths assessments, culture assessments or any flavor of personality assessments then proudly post them on their office door. This is often done with the best of intentions, but misses the opportunity. Instead of broadcasting what is static, what about broadcasting what is changing?

Instead of people telling that we are an XYZ, or a dominant red, or a strategic owl (all dubious fixed states), how about we simply tell people what we are working on to improve?

Broadcasting change might be stating that you are working to be a better influencer, be better at building on other people's ideas, or being more approachable. These are all changeable, positive future states.

Just like a post-it note at home, it is much more useful to tell people where you are going than where you have been.

Open to New Opportunities

Often when we see this phrase (especially on LinkedIn) it means "I'm looking for work," but we should all be on the lookout for new opportunities to learn and grow.

Recently I attended a lecture given by a physics professor at the university down the street. Much of what he said went over my head, but I did gather that incredible advances have been made in harnessing the power of x-rays. His team took a piece of equipment that covered a mile and cost \$600 million and shrunk it down to fit in a lab and costs \$6 million. The resulting x-ray beam acts like a laser and can cut through steel like butter, but the real benefits are in imaging. The beam's particles are so fast and precise that it can make movies of protein synthesis and electron rotation. It is truly amazing and eye-opening technology. The two hour investment of time yielded great benefits: I met some interesting people and greatly expanded my understanding of the world.

Too often we can get stuck in a bubble and isolated from new thinking. Look for new opportunities; sometimes they can be as revealing as an x-ray.

"Here you go beautiful..."

...phrases like these (and other signs of great customer service) are music to my ears. This is what I heard from a hard-working lady when I was grabbing a quick meal on the run at the airport. What I heard next really puzzled me. As she handed me my hamburger in a bag (please do not judge me, my diet is not the point of this story) she said that the mustard is in the bag—they do not put mustard on hamburgers. I was perplexed. If a hamburger restaurant does not put mustard on a hamburger, what is it that they do exactly? How did that particular policy come into operation? And at what point did people stop thinking?

Last week an awful news story surfaced about a dog dying in flight after an United Airlines flight attendant insisted that the animal be placed in the overhead compartment.

An over-used axiom is that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” I would hope people remember that there is no substitute for judgement, no matter what the culture, strategy, or policy.

Vae Victus...Woe to the Vanquished

This Latin admonition is to not expect leniency when conquered. However, many people are conquered before they even start. They wonder if they are good enough. They expect that others are better, so they do not put forward their own thoughts or energies. Now THAT’s lamentable.

Ups and Downs

Humans have been talking about ups and downs for a long time. The Greeks have used the words anabasis and katabasis for ups and downs as early as Homer’s *Odyssey*, written in the 8th century BC.

Katabasis means to go down or descend. Anabasis means to ascend or rise up. The earliest hero stories include both a descent and an ascent. Storytellers call that narrative pattern the hero’s journey.

A down requires a good up to complete the story.

Businesses have ups and downs. Teams have ups and downs. People have personal ups and downs.

Downs are a natural part of the story, and likewise the ups. Do your best to make any downs worth it with a great up.

Garbage Solving

Many people have the habit of trying to solve too much.

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch (located between California and Hawaii) is an area with high concentrations of plastics pollution. It’s about the size of Texas. It will have a profound and predictably negative impact on the quality and health of our oceans. Everyone agrees we need a healthier and less polluted planet. And yet, while much energy is spent on discussions back and forth about existence and degree of impact of global warming, we could probably be getting this trash out of the ocean.

Similar things happen at work. People (all with good intentions) try to solve too much. They try to solve everything with one grand, elegant strategy when sometimes we just need a net and some focus to get rid of the garbage.

Feedback may be the breakfast of champions, but you don't still don't want to eat here...

I was told by a very experienced construction leader that one way to get feedback from the team is to read what is written on the walls of the port-o-potties on the job site. He felt it is a valuable (if graphic) way to know what people think of your leadership. I admire his fortitude.

There are lots of ways to get feedback and that is an interesting one. We should always be on the lookout for feedback and we should not wait for a formal 360 or an annual review. Ask people and keep your eyes open. There may be signs if you get attentive—wherever you find yourself.

Ghost Moose

Beware the multitude of small things that can sap energy.

The moose population is being decimated in Maine and surrounding states. The culprit is not hunters, big predators, or even lack of food, but rather a plague of winter ticks. Moose ranging in size from 800 to 1500 pounds can be so infested they lose their hair and expose their pale hide, earning the description “ghost moose.” The calves may simply die—all because of a tiny animal that takes a small drop of blood at a time.

Small depletions in energy can add up. Energy can be wasted in small ways every day:

- Easily giving up valuable real estate on a calendar
- Fixing other people’s mistakes
- Not being organized
- Accepting half-answers
- Doing someone else’s job
- Meeting the standards of others and ignoring our own standards

Don’t allow your energy to be consumed in small and meaningless ways. People have infinite creativity and yet operate with finite energy. Guard that energy vigorously.

Manufactured problems

There's a facility in the US that has millions of mice in inventory. A researcher can buy a mouse with nearly any disease or genetic condition—from glaucoma to hepatitis to rheumatoid arthritis. Each mouse is a manufactured problem. Manufacturing problems is the company's business.

This company has a very unique business, yet many companies act like they are in the business of manufacturing problems too.

They issue rosy production estimates for public and investor consumption. They allow senior leaders to perpetuate egregious personal behavior against employees. They focus competition on the inside instead of the outside. They allow poor customer service to hijack their public relations. They put the wrong person in the wrong role. In short, they create problems that take them off the course of actually doing their business.

To what extent is your company creating its own problems? To what extent is your company creating problems versus being a business that solves the problems of customers?

In rare instances, being a creator of problems is a good business model. For the vast majority of businesses this is not the case.

Successful People are more Spring than Sponge

Be a spring not a sponge. Do not just soak up irritations, problems or emotions of others. If something bothers you (and is in fact important to you), do something about it. Spring into action and use the energy to your advantage.

I'm sooo busy.

Unfortunately “busy” has become a badge of honor. People are so proud of being busy. Any fool can be busy.

I overheard a guy at the next table at a hotel coffee shop. This self-important idiot declared how busy he was to a rapt audience of two (I'm guessing he is a potential client) and that he could only spare 30 minutes. He then he wasted the next 15 minutes explaining his schedule. Too many people say I'm busy because of poor self-esteem or to make themselves sound important.

Limited time on a schedule can be fact. Smart people will look for ways to apply that time best. The lowest form of time allocation is using time to lament how little time one has.

What is your calculus?

When I was planning my career in college I was considering business or Japanese. Luckily, I got some common-sense advice from one of my professors: how about be great at both? That insight allowed me to put together two distinct bodies of knowledge and leverage the power of a foreign language along with business insights. The advice sparked a fulfilling career and sent me around the globe. It was the difference between multiplication and division.

Multipliers tend to concentrate. Dividers tend to dilute.

Multipliers focus time, energy and resources of a specific domain. Dividers scatter their resources.

Multipliers work in concert with others for win-win. Dividers work interactions as a series of win-lose situations.

Multipliers perceive their value as impact. Dividers perceive their value as dollars per hour.

Multipliers think “we”. Dividers think “us/them.”

Multipliers leverage wisdom of the past with new knowledge in the present. Dividers think that was then and this is now.

Get in the habit of looking for things that can be combined and leveraged versus isolated and diminished.

Too much too late

While the common saying warns of “too little too late”, there is also the phenomenon of “too much too late.”

I was getting on a flight to Boston and saw a man who was very nervous about potential damage to his guitar. He said he had a bad experience on a past flight when the guitar was put in the hold and the guitar neck snapped. He was in one of the last boarding groups and there would be no room for his guitar in the overhead bin. He asked the attendant to put in first class. She explained there was no room. He asked if they had a closet they could put it in. No dice. He was getting very upset.

My observation about the whole exchange is that this was not a man who was learning from his experience. He would say that the guitar was very valuable to him, but he was not acting like it. He was putting all his energy into a long harangue to the gate agent about the state of airline service when he was holding a ticket on the flight with the last boarding group. If the guitar was so

valuable, why did he not upgrade to a better seat, so he could get an overhead bin? The only thing he was willing to do was berate a gate agent for service he did not buy. He was not learning, and he was doing too much too late.

He was putting all his energy on the back end of the situation, with no regard for the front end of the situation.

This week think about situations or outcomes that are important to you. Can you reduce incidences of “too much too late”? If you have examples of situations you have improved through proactivity, I would love to hear about them.

Scrambled Eggs and a Fork in the Road

My wife and I walk the dogs every morning. We see all sorts of things related to people and their morning commutes. Recently we saw a guy in his car, balancing a full plated breakfast on his steering wheel while holding a fork in one hand. It looked precarious and seems like a dangerous distraction.

I wonder how many people are on their way to work already trying to do too much. This can cause distraction, contribute to missed opportunities, and otherwise distract from performance in the moment.

This week be on the lookout for situations where you are trying to do too much and not apply yourself 100% to the issue/task at hand. I would be curious (drop me a line if you like) about 1) what caused you to have too much on your plate and 2) what you have tried to prevent or manage the occurrence.

If number 2 was fine for ‘The Boss’...

It is important to use the right criteria for success. Bruce Springsteen, surprisingly, never had a #1 song on the Billboard charts. The Boss is still in good company. Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, James Brown, KISS, and Metallica never had #1 songs either, and yet all enjoyed enormous success and entertained millions. None of those performers seem to have suffered from not hitting that one metric. Be selective about success criteria for yourself and your organization—whether the criteria is “#1” or “winning.”

A Bit of Both...

I'm a bit of a hodgepodge. I'll spend an hour at the gym, finish up with my protein shake—and sometimes I'll transition from that directly to a cigar by the pool.

We are all a mixed bag of traits, habits, and experiences. Some of these are paradoxically complimentary and some are diametrically opposed. Cigars and exercise appear opposite, but they in fact compliment my well-being and relaxation.

I'm a country boy who spent his high school years wearing a baseball hat embroidered with a picture of a fish on it. (I did not date much.) I've also read medieval Japanese literature in the native language.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. It's good to have a blend of ideas, thoughts, inputs, outlets, inspirations and distractions. These make us well-rounded, interesting people who resist simplistic labels.

Are you conservative or liberal? Are you driven or understanding? Are you a dog person or a cat person? Beach or mountains? There is often no benefit to the reduction. Unless you are filling out an online dating questionnaire, who cares? It's ok to be a bit of both.

There's a lot of talk these days about people staying in their own echo-chamber. People read articles and books with the same viewpoint. People who get their news from social media (always a bad idea) will always be served similar stories and viewpoints by the algorithms that are supposed to represent our preferences.

Evolutionarily speaking, the hybrid usually has the greater capacity for thriving in change. The combination of traits makes the hybrid stronger than isolated organisms. This week find time to read, view, or otherwise experience something new and off your normal path. You might find the new input valuable—or you might just find yourself to be a little more interesting. Or a bit of both.

Creativity

When people say they are not creative they are practicing a form of self-amputation. Creativity is not limited to artists. Creativity is not limited to technology or products. Creativity can be applied to how an organization will deliver, to whom it will deliver, and what it will deliver. Creativity can be

applied to raising the performance of an organization so that it delivers value faster, better, or cheaper. The leader's job is to inspire creativity and see that it can be applied. Ask yourself: in what ways are you helping your organization to flex its creativity muscles?

Concealed Carry or Open Carry?

The recent national conversation about guns reminded me of a saying from martial arts: the real weapon is a mind.

If the mind is a weapon, would you say yours is a “concealed carry” or an “open carry”? Do you keep your smarts a secret? Do you have opinions that you are holding back? Do you contribute to high level discussions or remain in the safety zone of the tactical? Are you cowed when in the room with colleagues that have decades of experience? There is a lot to be said for humility, but we should not confuse humility with dumbing down. As far as smarts go, there is little value in a concealed carry approach.

If the concealed carry description above resonates with you, then this week resolve to speak up and show your smarts. Give a considered opinion. Share your perspective. Point out things that are being over-looked.

If you would describe yourself as an open carry type (i.e. people respect and expect you will contribute your thoughts), then this week consider how to get the smarts of others out and into the mix. Seek to uncover the intelligence and viewpoints of those that may tend to be less forthcoming with their ideas. Ask for opinions. Ask for options. Ask for perspective.

Whether you are sharing your brains more or you are getting others to share their brains more, your business will be better for it.

Incompetence

While low engagement is flogged as a leading cause of poor business performance, incompetence is an obvious, but often, down-played factor. Leaders don't like to talk about it. Even “experts” like to gloss over it. When relating my observation about the cause of an organization's awful results as “gross incompetence of key employees,” another consultant told me that “gross incompetence” is not a real reason. I beg to differ—it is a great reason. If gross incompetence exists, what other reasons does one need?

In sports, player statistics paint a stark picture. It is clear who is good and who is not. In business, cause is often not so clear, but sometimes it is as clear as the summer sky in Arizona. If so, why hesitate?

The Wall Street Journal recently published the [obituary](#) of the former CEO of FMC, Robert Malott. In it, Mr. Malott was quoted as saying “The frustration of dealing with loyal, hardworking and incompetent people was very hard for me,” adding “I tolerated incompetence longer than I should have.”

Let’s get real. There are many situations that are caused by incompetence that can only be alleviated by having people in place that can do a competent job. We do a disservice to our organizations when we down-play incompetence and hope against hope that more training, coaching, or higher engagement will have any effect.

Clear as the Pickleball on your Face

A colleague was telling me about a new sport that “everybody” is playing these days: pickleball. It was news to me, so I googled it. Yes, pickleball is all the rage—with a particular, generational subset. If you belong to a silver sneaker walking group, you probably know all about pickleball. If not, it may be news to you too.

At work too, people often assume that things are well-known to others when they are not. Leaders assume everybody knows things like the strategy, who top clients are, direction of new leadership, status of innovation efforts, importance of new quality processes, how to win this year, and the benefits of the new ERP system. Leaders are often disappointed when the assumption does not pan out.

Don’t assume your communication has landed or is well-understood—even for the “obvious” things. Otherwise you might find yourself all alone on the pickleball court.

A Legion of Competitors

My wife and I are obsessed with the Marvel TV series *Legion*. The imagery is trippy. The characters are unique. The philosophy nuggets that are woven into the story are thought-provoking; for example, “delusions are a puzzle you walk, created by yourself.” (I suspect there’s a guy supplying the writers, directors and cinematographers with hallucinogenics. If so, he also deserves a film or IMDb credit, maybe under “catering.”) The point is these guys are creative. In a time crowded with superheroes in movies and TV, *Legion* still stands out.

We should not underestimate the power of being different.

All of my clients work in competitive environments. Competitive environments always require standing out. People have many options for products to buy, services to enjoy, suppliers to select, places to work, and even leaders to work for. Success requires standing out; being different.

“Being the best” is often hard and may not, in the end, be a big distinction. One major cell phone service carrier recently ran a campaign that their coverage was slightly worse than their competitor but a lot cheaper, so why pay more.

Being different is also hard, but is only limited by our creativity and usually entails reframing what value and benefits really are for those we seek to attract or influence.

Always seek to improve, but do not neglect finding ways to stand out.

Memorial Day

Today is Memorial Day, a day to remember those that died in service of this country.

It is truly stunning to consider the range of freedoms we enjoy as a result of the sacrifice of so many. These may include the freedom to criticize elected leaders without reprisal, the freedom to move about the country, the freedom to leave the country, the freedom to read a newspaper published by journalists not in fear of their lives, the freedom to start a business, the freedom to invest in and dispose of personal assets, the freedom to associate, and the freedom to worship or not worship.

It’s impossible to adequately express the gratitude for the gifts we enjoy due to the sacrifice of those that served.

There are many ways to use the reminder of Memorial Day. This week I will continue to plug the holes of my understanding of our history. I will also reaffirm my appreciation for all the freedoms we enjoy—and strive to keep in perspective the relatively minor issues of my day, minor irritations that could only occur in pursuit of a life expanded by the freedom available through the sacrifice of others.

Energy Creation

I counsel people all the time on the need to conserve energy. We have unlimited creativity, but finite energy. It’s good advice, but it is not whole story. Energy management is not just about conservation, it is also about creation. We can create our own energy. Don’t believe me? Think about how much energy we

have when we are leaving for vacation versus when we are returning. How we approach things makes a huge difference.

Below are a few energy-creating techniques to try (or re-apply):

Boost the amount of time you spend using your talents. Sometimes we need to spend time doing things we don't like (that's why they call it work), but staying in research mode if you really don't enjoy research is a drain. Conversely, if you love strategy, find ways to do more and more of that.

Boost the amount of time you spend developing talents. Don't just play to your existing strengths, play to your future strengths. Are you a mediocre speaker, but feel you might have a knack for it? Get some practice and create some opportunities.

Release energy through acceleration. Getting moving. Don't try to boil the ocean. Take discrete steps on big projects. As I was reminded recently at a technical lecture: an accelerated particle releases energy. We have all experienced the rush that comes when we hit the accelerator. Blow out of the procrastination gear.

Reframe the situation. Are we really in a war for talent (or market share or profits) or are we experts at uncovering latent opportunity? Setting a positive frame (not to be confused with Pollyanna-ish platitudes) can make a huge difference.

Let your ego take a hit. The movie *Deadpool 2* came out last month. Deadpool's super powers are super-healing. Egos have super-healing too, yet we act like a hit to the ego will be fatal. Letting an ego take a hit and see it recover is freeing and a great source of energy.

Express your enthusiasm, don't curb it. Tell yourself and others if you are genuinely excited about something. Your genuine enthusiasm will not just infect others, it will re-infect you. (That may be a lousy metaphor, but you get my drift.)

Do be judicious in how you utilize energy, but also utilize the fact that to a large extent we can create our own internal energy.

Bring It Back

Hard to believe but we are in the sixth month of what we recently thought of as a "new" year. Not long ago many of us were planning the big changes we were going to make and the great goals we were going to achieve. We commonly refer

to these as “resolutions.” It’s time to bring them back. It is time to remember what you were excited to accomplish in 2018.

In yoga, the instructor (in that annoying sing-song voice) will remind the class to bring the attention back to the breathing. The same thing is encouraged in meditation. In both cases, bringing it back to the breathing helps bring the focus back to the basics. It is very easy to get distracted. It is very easy to forget. Go back and revisit your goals and intentions for 2018. Make any corrections and keep at it. Great goals require persevering and staying resolute. Perhaps that is why they are called resolutions and not “wishes.”

No Prob Llama

...so said the t-shirt I saw recently (with the cartoon of a llama).

It made me smile and was a timely, humorous reminder to take things in stride. Many problems we encounter we have solved before. Many problems can be solved with the people we surround ourselves with. Many problems, upon further review, may not be for us to solve.

So take some perspective and be confident you can handle any prob llama that ambles your way.

It is not all in your head

Most coaching for leader or workplace effectiveness is focused on the mental aspects: developing perspective, emotional intelligence, projecting positivity, etc.—all worthy topics. However, there are also physical aspects that should not be ignored and that cannot be compensated for with sole focus on the mental game. Just like a person cannot out-train a poor diet, a person cannot out-think poor performance habits. The basics of good self-care (nutrition, movement, and recovery) go a long way in supporting great habits that translate to excellent performance at work. The best coaching in the world will be largely useless for someone who is sleep-deprived, un-exercised, or fueling on soda and granola bars.

I Don't Know Anyone Like You

...so said the leader of a big mentor group here in Phoenix I was introduced to recently. This comment was made despite the fact you can't swing a dead rat in Phoenix without hitting a “leadership” or “executive” coach.

I believe he said it because when I give my two cents it is based on evidence, I am well-read, have a wide variety of life and work experiences, I am not wedded to a particular coaching dogma, and talk about ways to get practical results quickly. He thought I was unique in a crowded field.

None of us really achieve our full potential by being better than others. We blend in (and dumb down our talents) by simply trying to emulate others. We stand out by emphasizing our uniqueness.

Conventional wisdom emphasizes playing to your strengths. I would add the suggestion to emphasize the following in yourself and others:

Emphasize results over “how”...There are many ways to get to a result. Leaving leeway for yourself and others on how to get to a particular destination is in itself a path to grow.

Emphasize expression of unique perspectives... Are you speaking up about what you are seeing that others have missed or are leaving unsaid? Are you relaying stories that translate your past experience to current application?

Emphasize leveraging pillars of experience... Are you applying your past body of experiences to current situations? Can other bodies of experience outside your current business role also apply? An engineering background combined with business experience is a powerful combination. Likewise, years abroad in the Peace Corps can translate to working with global business units.

There truly is no one else with your unique combination of perspective, creativity and experience. The trick is not to keep it a secret from yourself or others.

Be on Guard

Guard your minutes or you will lose your moments: moments to make a difference, work on the big things, discern key trends, savor an experience, make a correction, and a host of other potential opportunities. Junk food is defined as food empty of nutritional content. Don't trade junk time-consumers for high-quality rewarding activities.

Supplement to Progress

People often unaware when they are in the way. You can see examples as you navigate the airport with people texting as they walk or on the road when they drive. They are oblivious to the fact that they are impediments to progress.

People can be equally unaware when they are a supplement to progress and not an impediment to progress. People may not realize the many ways they help an organization to succeed. People can anticipate problems and reach out to colleagues. They can realize that some people have been left out of the loop and help connect the dots. They can help get conversations back on track after sinking down a rat hole. Leaders that effectively point out the instances of being a supplement to progress can ensure continued high value behavior.

I Don't Buy It

I don't buy it when people tell me they are "just" a manager or "just" have a couple years experience or they are "just" the sales—or IT or safety or quality or compliance— guy/gal. I don't buy it when people use excuses to think small or act incrementally. People come up with all sorts of reasons to hold back opinions, accept mediocre thinking, and otherwise watch opportunities sail off into the horizon.

Most people I meet could be 50% more assertive and still be the "nice" person that they want to be. Yet they dumb themselves down, by using "reasonable" excuses that take their brains out of the game. It is a symptom of learned helplessness.

If this is you, stop it. Your team/organization/business needs your whole brain not a self-lobotomized nice version of you. If you are seeing this in your team, then call it out. Don't let your results suffer because people are reticent about what they can achieve or the value of their insights.

Lost in Translation

People can experience great success in one area and find difficulty in translating that success into other areas. The translation is often disrupted by ego and fear. One solution is appropriate metrics.

Running marathons and other endurance events have exploded in popularity. The vast majority of participants (especially newbies) have the simple goal (appropriate metric) of just finishing the event. Winning is not normally on their minds. They have little fear as to the outcome. Subsequently, their egos are not hurt when they finish 550 out of 1,000. Just finishing was a healthy goal in that it got them off the couch and making some incremental progress in their fitness and mental toughness.

Too bad people don't apply the same thinking to other challenges: publishing an article, making presentations in the company, leading a team training. Often the metrics for success are perfectionist and puritanically high. Failure would hurt their ego, so they stay in place—potential untapped.

How Will I Know

Goal-setting is a critical step in people development. But lack of specific measures often makes the process a farce. People confuse action steps with measurable outcomes and compliant supervisors go along for the ride.

In 1985 Whitney Houston dominated the airwaves with “How Will I Know.” That title can also be used as a powerful phrase for cutting through the ambiguity and get to real success measures.

Employee: I want to get better at innovation/strategy/people development/execution

Supervisor: How will we know you improved? What will we see that is different in the organization?...How will I know?

The key here is DNSSSM (do not suffer sloppy success measures). Successful people do not suffer fools easily. Neither should they suffer success measures that are fuzzy or merely state a step that will be taken. The person you are developing must be able to come up with qualitative or quantitative evidence that they have improved. Sloppy: *I will have meetings to generate innovation ideas with my team.* Better: *My team will formally generate more ideas to improve time to cash. At least one will be proposed to division management.*

Keep standards high for clarity in all things in your business, including outcomes for growth.

Postage Stamp Empowerment

Leaders cannot expect their people to create a compelling vision for themselves if those people feel their personal canvas is the size of a postage stamp. Leaders say (at least publicly) that they want their people to be empowered. Leaders are often fuzzy on what that really means, but they usually have some expectations for more individualized decision-making and initiative. If empowerment can be thought of as the degree to which people feel they can make decisions that affect the outcome of their work, then the more those boundaries can be defined and expanded the more they will feel empowered.

Three things to consider:

1. **Define the parameters on which they can make decisions.**

Parameters might include how much they are authorized to spend, what they can spend on (ex. capital or self-development), how and if they can hire, appropriate communication channels across departments, scenarios that require escalation, use of vendors, and clients/markets that can be pursued.

2. **Define the scope of the parameters.** Some retailers pre-define that customer service people can make a situation “right” up to say 50 dollars. A shared services leader (like HR, IT, Finance, or Legal) might say they are ok with flexible schedules as long as somebody is always onsite to support operations. A construction project superintendent may be authorized to approve change orders of a certain size. One client authorized any employee or sub-contractor to stop work if quality or safety were at risk.

3. **Uncover the beliefs that are also at work.** Below every behavior is a belief. If people believe that they will get fired for any mistake they will not make decisions. If people believe management really does not really support initiative, they will wait. If people believe they do not have the authority they will defer to their leader.

If you want people to be empowered, do more than just say so. Be clear on what they can and cannot do. Make that latitude as wide as is prudent to the situation. Anticipate likely inhibiting beliefs and get them surfaced. That is how you get people feeling their power is the size of a postage stamp versus a large canvas.

Yes and No

The cause of problems can often be quite different from what we assume. Poor assumptions lead to poor diagnosis. Poor diagnosis leads to poor prescription. And poor prescription is no cure. Some examples of areas that often suffer from poor assumptions:

- Regarding “change management”: People do not fear change, they fear uncertainty. Focus less on avoiding change and more on avoiding attendant uncertainty.
- Regarding “time management”: People do not hate meetings, they hate wasting time. Don’t just ban meetings (or powerpoint, or chairs, or some other silliness), re-set the bar on meeting discipline tied to objectives and outcomes.
- Regarding “generational problems”: Organizations do not have millennial problems, they have a new group of individuals problem. Organizations

shouldn't manage by generations any more than they should manage by gender or race. The "millennials" are best managed as individuals with their own set of characteristics.

- Regarding "accountability": Leaders have more options than behavior management. Leaders are not limited to managing behavior which gets compliance. They can also address underlying beliefs which results in commitment.

Consider these and other areas that might be suffering from poor assumptions. The degree to which we can see things clearly is directly related to generating good options and effective actions.

Apology Allergies

On a recent business trip, my rental car stunk. Literally stunk. It was an olfactory assault case. There must have been something rotten in the car once and the remediation attempt did not work. Hot awfulness rolled out every time I opened the car door after it baked in the sun between appointments.

I pointed out the fact to the attendant in the lot when I returned it. He said, apathetically, he could not do anything about it, but I could talk to the desk if I wanted to. I had time, so I did talk to the desk attendant. She was polite and asked her supervisor if she could do anything for me. They took a day off the rental charge. Nether really gave me what I was looking for: some recognition of my poor experience. Both seemed to want to avoid an apology like I avoid cat hair for fear of an allergic reaction.

I see this aversion to apologies in organizations too, and it is equally unnecessary. In fact, apologies can have a profoundly positive effect. Admissions of infallibility are not signs of weakness. Not being able to admit the obvious (we can all make mistakes) IS a sign of weakness. As the Japanese say, even monkeys fall from trees.

Been bringing back new leadership paradigms every time you read a new book on a business flight and confusing your team?

Been a poor collaborator with your peers?

Missed some serious risks to the organization?

Mis-spoke at a team meeting?

Took action without the full story?

Chronically late to meetings?

The meetings you run are fuzzy on objectives and long on meanderings?

Over-promised on what your team could deliver?

Whiffed a 1:1 conversation?

Lost your cool with others and said/did something you regret?

Response time chronically slow?

Hired the wrong person for the team, who is now (thankfully) gone?

The much ballyhooed project launch was a bust?

None of these situations are great, but likely not fatal. You might give people what they want, but are not asking for: recognition of your impact on their poor experience. Let people know you screwed up and affirm the intent to be better. You just might find the air much clearer.

Feed your Opportunities and Starve your Problems

“Feed you opportunities and starve your problems” is the lasting suggestion from the late great Peter Drucker. Too often leaders get wrapped up in just the opposite: they feed their problems and starve opportunity.

How many times have you seen leaders spend inordinate amounts of time dealing with the effects of a problem employee and missing the opportunities that could be gained from their already high performers? How many times have you seen large project launches and their often predictable and preventable failures suck up the valuable resources of the organization?

Healthy companies have key leaders that understand they are in the business of starving problems and feeding opportunities. Pursuit of opportunities today are the profits of tomorrow. Can you imagine what the oil industry would look like today if the industry and solely dealt with vertical problems and ignored horizontal opportunity?

There are a many reasons leaders tend to focus on problems and give opportunities short shrift:

- Leaders are ridiculously good at problem solving. Most leaders I see can get to the root of a problem and attack it well. Problem solving is in the comfort level of most leaders—and that is where they stay.
- Organizations have systems for solving problems, but not for exploiting opportunity. Quality systems, production systems, and safety systems

are all designed to optimize decisions for past conditions. They are resistant to changes for future conditions.

- Early opportunity has the fragility of a balloon and bureaucracy has sharp edges. Unwieldy groups with little ability to say yes and wide latitude to say no can often kill ideas before they even get off the ground. It is why continuous improvement groups divorced from business outcomes rarely produce anything.
- Pursuit of opportunity is uncertain and includes likely failure. Solving problems is often concrete and has the added benefit of immediate gratification.
- Pursuit of opportunity takes time, patience, creativity and discipline. Leaders will often tire themselves out with the business of what is loudest today.
- Turf tolerance. Feeding opportunity by definition requires shifting resources from existing areas to new areas. Those with vested interest in the old turf may resist consciously and unconsciously.
- Shifting to new opportunities feels hard and merely adapting to the present feels easier.

Leaders can start to shift the balance and get back into the business of opportunity only when they firmly decide to shift their priorities AND marry that decision with the skills to create new value. Problem solving is a great place to start, but a lousy place to stay.

Join the Club

There are all sorts of clubs to belong to: car clubs, gun clubs, country clubs, supper clubs. When I was a kid the Mickey Mouse club looked cool. The Little Rascals had the He-Man Woman Haters Club. Today many of us might belong to the BBC (Bad Back Club) or the STC (Spare Tire Club). Those last two might happen by genetics or choices, but here is one that I think we should all join: the Ridiculously Productive Club.

Too many people today settle for busy when they could be productive. If you were to choose a trophy would you choose “ridiculously productive” or “busy”?? Yet when people ask how we are doing, many of us (myself included, but less and less) are tempted to reply with pride “oh just so busy.” Busy is nothing to be proud of. Any fool can be busy. The homeless guy pushing a cart probably is busy with things too. Productive is where we should focus attention.

Economists prize productivity as a key measure of future economic prosperity. They do not measure being busy. They know that yesterday’s productivity decisions are today’s profits. The same principle works for individuals.

Below are several habits to consider for admission to the “club.”

- Stop making excuses. Just get with it and don't overthink.
- Move from being a work in progress (getting back to a standard) and be a work in refinement (working on things that are creating new value above your old standard).
- Move from problem solving to value creation.
- Don't let the little get in the way of the big.
- Broaden your vision for yourself and what you can achieve.
- Don't confuse time spent with value created.
- Pay appropriate attention to the important and not yet urgent.
- Mind your minutes so that you can have moments.

And now (this writing done) I am on to other ways to create value for myself and others--and you should too.

I am so Over Communication

I am over it. People keep saying their organizations need more communication. They are wrong. My gym has been playing the same sixty second in-house commercial for private training (on a constant loop) for the last seven months on three giant screens. Is more of that really necessary? My dogs go nuts trying to get my attention every time I go near the cabinet that holds their treats. Do they think more jumping will get them more treats? How many meetings have you attended and heard (or were asked to report) the same data again and again? Do people really believe there is a large benefit from being cc'd on every email? More is not the answer. We are nearly drowning in more.

More is not the answer, what organizations really need is *better*. The next time you are tempted to feel that increased quantity of communication is necessary, consider adding more quality of communication with the following categories:

Objectives. Drive for clarity on what the group is trying to achieve. What are we trying to accomplish? Why are we in this meeting?

Ownership. Drive for clarity on who is responsible. Who will make this decision? Who has this next step?

Action items. Drive for clarity on next steps. On what did we agree? What will be done by when?

Risks. Help surface those risks that can sink a project, initiative, or option that is under consideration.

Deviations. Highlight and drive for clarity on those issues in which there are differences from what was planned and what has been realized. Too often people leave this to the last minute or beyond the point that anything can be done about it.

Opportunity. Never be shy about this one. Organizations must continually surface areas in which they can add future value.

Best practices. There are always lessons learned in other departments (sales, production, quality, safety, etc.) that can be used in other parts of the organization. These lessons should be a part of institutional memory and have extreme value if communicated across the organization and across time. This is critically important for organizations with more new people coming in.

This is not an exhaustive list, but these categories are all related to higher quality communication. Organizations today don't need more communication, but many would certainly benefit from better communication in those predictable areas that can impact organizational effectiveness. Being discriminating about the quality of communication will help leaders be part of the solution and not a part of the problem.

Bernardus-high and Burrito-fast

Earlier this year I attended a conference in Carmel, California. Kim also came with and we stayed at a lovely resort called the Bernardus Inn. The resort can be described as "California country sophisticated." The resort vibe (from the buildings, to the grounds, and on to the surrounding vineyards) is pretty low key and quiet, but everything is done perfectly. It has a very high aesthetic but is also comfortable and functional. Our stay at the Bernardus raised our standards and we now use "it needs a little more Bernardus" as a short-hand description for "it needs to be a little better." We love the Bernardus.

We also love a little place down the street called the Burrito Factory. It has the best breakfast burritos and we get there a couple Saturdays a month. The restaurant has become a bit of a game for us, because they are always making very small improvements. It is fun to guess what is different from visit to visit. The improvements are small but constant. A new tree planted outside. One accent wall painted inside. A new "open" sign. New concrete curb bumpers in the parking spaces. Our little burrito place has become our model for speed of improvements.

I think the combination of the two presents a powerful strategy for improvement: set higher standards, but move fast on the little things. So find your own (higher) Bernardus standard and get moving at burrito speed.

Invisible

People are often convinced that things do not exist when in fact, they do exist, but they just happen to be invisible to them. A family member living in a small town kept saying “there are no jobs here,” when another family member (in the same community) found and accepted a job she would have loved to have. He just went looking for a job where she just went looking for confirmation of her assertion that there were no jobs.

Sir Joseph Lister completely reshaped the practice of medicine through revolutionary antiseptic procedures. There was angry push-back from the medical authorities of the time. They could not see the point in washing hands or clothes prior to surgery to fight things they could not see.

Openness to new information is essential for growth and high performance and it starts with the right mindset. Just because we don't know how to do it now does not mean there is no solution.

Pathologizing

Not everything is a disease, disorder, or permanent condition. Some things get worse when we label them. A man was taken prisoner by Somali pirates and held captive in awful conditions for two years. In an interview, he said he had asked his psychiatrist if he had PTSD. The doctor said it was indisputable that he had trauma from the experience but suggested that putting a label on it would not make it any better or easier to deal with. The doctor's advice was not to pathologize his circumstances.

Being held prisoner by Somali pirates is an extreme example but there are many more mundane examples that are likely not to benefit from pathologizing. Things like:

“slow learner”

“not good with people”

“poor public speaker”

“over-analytical”

“not analytical”

“not good at delegating”

“not organized”

These examples are all undesirable conditions, but they can all be remedied with appropriate attention. Attachment of labels will likely not help.

White Space

White space is powerful design concept. It works to bring the essential into focus. Look at any marketing piece for Apple and you will get a great example of its power.

I often recommend clients create white space on their calendars. Clients tell me all the time about entire weeks booked back to back with meetings. High performers need white space to get perspective, see new solutions, recharge, and stay sharp. Hamsters on a wheel have no white space.

What to use it for? Use it for you. It does not need any further purpose or justification than that. The card game UNO has the Wild card. It can be played in any situation to keep the game moving. White space can do the same for you.

Maybe It's Time (to let the old ways die)

"Maybe it's time (to let the old ways die)" is one of the excellent songs from the soundtrack of *A Star is Born*. The song is a sweet, sobering reflection on life.

For many of us the issue is not so much getting new knowledge or new skills, it is a matter of letting go of things that don't serve us anymore. Sculptors will often say their secret is to remove anything that is NOT their subject. My father had a reputation for being pretty tough on people. Several years ago he floored me by stating "each of us is a mess just trying to do our best." Something changed for him. I imagine it was the result of letting something go.

We can let all sorts of things go: habits, perspectives, biases, history, labels, and even injury.

The old ways can die. And in some situations, maybe they should.

[If you have not seen the movie, I highly recommend it. The song referenced here can be [heard on Youtube.](#)]

Expectations

I think most people did not expect anything more of Bradley Cooper. He has enjoyed a great career as an actor in comedic and action films. He could have

stayed home and counted his *Guardians of the Galaxy* money (playing a talking racoon), but he decided to go out on a limb and direct, sing, and act in *A Star is Born*.

Nobody expected Teddy Roosevelt to be a political power. His family was already rich and connected. He could have stayed home, but he went on to become an astoundingly impactful president who deserves a great deal of credit for initiatives as varied as our National Park system and the Panama Canal.

Nobody expected Paul Allen, the co-founder of Microsoft who passed away this week, to be such a force in the computing world. He could have stayed in his job and left Bill Gates alone to finish his degree at Harvard, but he felt he could be a part of the revolution in computing.

Success to an almost exclusive degree is a function of re-setting our own expectations. If we cannot outperform our vision for ourselves why would we ever dare to set it low or allow it to plateau? If success is a journey, we should continually look for new additions to the map. Even space racoons seem to know this.

You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet

There are examples of miraculous leaps forward in thinking all around us.

The Passenger pigeon used to be one of the most abundant bird species in the US, then went extinct in 1914. Scientists are working to bring it and other iconic animals like the woolly mammoth back.

MIT researchers have developed a “body on a chip”—a device the size of a deck of cards that contains scaled-down versions of human organ systems with real tissue and circulation. The device promises fast development of medicines and may eliminate the need for animal testing in the future.

Even outside universities and think tanks, there are no lack of great ideas. Yet it is too easy to get lost in the busy. You will never see transformational ideas come to fruition in your organization if you don't manage time, attention, and resources. Without due care, great ideas are as ephemeral as a flock of birds winging their way towards extinction.

Feeling Lucky?

The folks that run the Mega Millions lottery do know their business. They realized that large jackpots drive sales from even the skeptical ticket buyers. Subsequently they decided to change their formula. The odds are longer, but

the jackpots are bigger than ever and the huge jackpots themselves drive more sales. The jackpots are staggeringly large, but the odds of winning got significantly worse.

The lottery is an example of a hard game to win. To what extent does it feel like the lottery in your organization? Do people feel like they hit the jackpot in the rare instance they have a winning day or week? To a large degree, leaders are in the business of creating games that people can win—and that is not a game of chance.

Façade

I recently witnessed a new low in cutting corners. Earlier this year I noticed (and wrote about) a gentleman who habitually walks into the gym with his ID, proceeds around the counter, and heads straight for the exit. The new low: he parked his car in the fire lane in front of the exit as he went through these motions. The ironic cherry on top of this story: his vanity license plate is an abbreviated version of “fastforward.” It is possible he is a great success in other areas of his life, but clearly this part of his life is a façade.

In a world obsessed with optics, we should eschew facades and simply embrace what is real: responsibility, progress, issues, failures, risks, and results. If the pig is so big you need to put the lipstick on with a roller, it may be time for a change.

Polymath

No, a polymath is not somebody good at both algebra and geometry. The term describes a person with deep expertise in many things. When it comes to thinking about strengths, people are too binary. They think they are only good at this or that. They think that because they are good at one thing they cannot be good at another.

“I’m just a sales guy/gal.”

“I’m just an operations guy/gal.”

“I’m analytical (and not creative).”

Limited thinking like that is why I am rabidly against pigeonholing people from assessments. It is why I push back on statements like the examples above. People are likely good at many things. Why they don't embrace the truth in that does not add up.

Wisdom

A good deal of the wisdom of many business books can be inferred from their titles:

From Good to Great (don't be complacent)

What Got you Here Won't Get You There (rethink your situational strengths)

Fierce Conversations (you should not be afraid to have them)

Extreme Ownership (accountability is important)

Even mediocre books (and the above are quite good) can have at least one good idea. The rest (make no mistake) are marketing tools for keynote speakers.

Millions of diet books are purchased every year and yet many people do not experience significant change. The reason is that the author has the cure but has not made a diagnosis as to whether their approach applies to you. Going "lectin-free" may not be your issue. Hormone imbalances may not be your issue. Yet there are books that proclaim this is the "answer" all have been waiting for.

Besides my book (now under contract and due out next year), the only book you should whole-heartedly adopt for your company is *How to be Ridiculously Prosperous without Totally Driving your Team Crazy* (and that may just be my second book).

Show Your Work

My elementary school math teachers all insisted that I show my work and not just get the right answer. They wanted to see how I got there. The same concept applies to influence.

It is relatively easy to come up with a good idea. You see good ideas every day. The rarity is good ideas brought into being by a disparate group of people. It is sheer laziness to simply have a great idea and expect people will be immediately charmed by its greatness.

Too many people express an idea, then feel rejected when the organization does not immediately embrace the idea. They get irritated and take their ball home. They feel the organization is too dumb to recognize a good idea when it sees one. That's lazy.

If you want to influence you have to show the work. Show the reasoning. Show the fit. Grit shows when people do the hard work of understanding their audience and helping to enlighten them as to an idea's impact on their self-interest and how the idea fits with what else is going on in the organization.

Many people want to be more influential. Sometimes showing the work IS the answer.

Deals with the Devil

The play "Faustus" was written over 400 years ago and is the basis for the term Faustian bargain. Dr. Faustus is the poster boy for deals with the Devil. Tellingly, in the story, the Devil asserts that people create their own hells.

It is worth considering to what extent our own behaviors, traits and habits are contributing to current adverse conditions.

Universally Bad Ideas

UBI is the acronym for the currently trendy idea of Universal Basic Income. There are those on both sides of the debate. I would suggest that UBI can also stand for "Universally Bad Ideas." Below are a few examples:

Equipping major airports and other public facilities such that basic sanitation (paper towels and water faucets) is 100% dependent on the availability of continuous uptime to the electrical grid. *Can't we anticipate risk?*

Telling people that they should stop standing on one side of escalators to let others pass, because the escalators were not designed for that and wear out quicker when people do that. *Can't they be designed for the conditions?*

Nationalizing whole industries (like oil in Venezuela) and expecting that the wealth will be distributed to those that are not politically connected or operating efficiencies to be realized. *Can we remember the basics of human motivation?*

We are surrounded by universally bad ideas. Take care that UBIs don't find their way into your organization through weak thinking or inertia.

Focus

The FBI spends resources investigating corruption in amateur sports and NCAA violations. The FDA spends resources on reduction of menthol cigarettes. These organizations (and many just like them) have rational-sounding justifications for these activities, but are they really saying with a straight face that these activities do not dilute effort from key outcomes desired by citizens?

To what extent are you allowing your teams or organizations to work on things that don't contribute to mission?

Optimistic

From some of my writing one might get the impression I am down on leadership or organizations. Quite contrary, I admire the many leaders and organizations I interact with and see the amazing value they create for their communities and families. It has been noted that the modern organization has been a major driving force in the creation of the high quality of life we enjoy here in the US.

While the Dilbert comics and the like point out the dysfunction of the modern organization, the modern organization also does enormous good. Think of the value created by the US oil industry. And where would we be without organizations like Microsoft, GE, Boeing, Wal-mart, or Fedex?

If I am blunt about things that leaders are missing, it is only because I know they can do even better...and do even more good for themselves, their families, and their communities.

I am optimistic about what organizations can create. And you should be too.

Risky Business

Investigators of the recent LION Air crash that killed 189 are pointing out the fact that one faulty sensor with no cross-checks pushed data to an autonomous system to push the nose down. The sensor was to help keep the plane from stalling if the nose rose to high. So far, the investigative theory is that the sensor thought the nose of the plane was too high even though it was where it should be. Pilots were fighting to pull the plane up while the automatic program was forcing it down.

That is what investigators believe today. If true, the tragedy illuminates some key points:

1. Don't let one point of data (that may be false) trigger automatic responses in your organization.

2. Even Boeing (a master of risk management) can get things wrong. If anyone tells you their innovative new idea has no risk, they are either lying or delusional.