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MANAGEMENT
PERSPECTIVES

Thinking

From the Editor

Was it Julie Andrews who sang of her favourite things? Hers included brown paper packages tied up with string and warm woolen mittens. Mine include riding my bike and exploring bookstores. Especially bookstores. They are absolutely marvellous hideaways for active imaginations ... they are places where time is suspended ... where disbelief is arrested.

Not long ago in a bookstore in Ottawa, I saw this quote painted on a post: *Learning is a natural pleasure common to all men.* Author? Plato. Time? 428 to 348 BC.

"Yes!" I thought, "he's bang on." And then ... and then I got stopped in my tracks when I matched Plato's observation against what I often see around me. How come so many of us don't know how pleasurable learning is? How come we don't realize how wildly exciting it can be to leave an old place and arrive at a new? How come so many think that learning is merely a pleasure long past, something we left when we graduated from school? It's so sad to see how some have limited their natural pleasure to learn.

Part of what we do at LIVE Consultants is bring you back to the natural pleasures of learning ... back to the place where learning is fun, exciting, and at moments, breath-taking.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

When you get to a certain stage in life, you find yourself wondering about the past. Often those idle moments start with the words "Remember when ... " or "Whatever happened to ... " Sometimes those moments are simply an opportunity to pause, reminisce, and reflect; sometimes they're a prompt to have a closer look, to check, or to rethink.

One of those respites got Stephen Baetz thinking. "Lately, I've caught myself shaking my head and muttering, 'Whatever happened to crisp, disciplined thinking?'"

In his article, Stephen argues that often our thinking is confused and ambiguous. In an attempt to turn around what he refers to as an epidemic, he offers "three sets of definitions that would be worthwhile for managers to keep straight as they lead."

Stephen Baetz is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Crisp Thinking

This may be a sign that I am getting older but I find myself, on a regular basis, beginning sentences with “Whatever happened to ...?” At one level, it’s a melancholy phrase that signals loss — as in, “Whatever happened to Bruce Underwood and Dave Armstrong? I haven’t seen them for ages.” On another level the phrase is tinged with disappointment, sad regret, and frustration — as in, “Whatever happened to good, old-fashioned service?”

Lately I’ve caught myself shaking my head muttering, “Whatever happened to crisp, disciplined thinking?” To make sure I’m more than just a cranky eccentric prone to eulogize the-good-old-days, I get asked for examples of confused, ambiguous thinking. I gladly oblige.

- Because team members agree it doesn’t mean they’re right; it only means they agree.
- Information is not knowledge.
- A client request is not a definition of what a client needs.
- Simple is not the same as easy.
- Because something is urgent doesn’t mean it’s important; it only means it’s urgent.
- More communication doesn’t ensure more understanding.
- Because something is new doesn’t mean it’s good; it only means it’s new.

The list could go on ... and I want to with chapter and verse illustrations for each ... but I usually get stopped in my tracks with others adding to the list and we play a sort of parlour game which gathers evidence that fuzzy thinking is as common as a cold.

In an attempt to stop an epidemic of intellectual lethargy and aching, disjointed communication, I offer three sets of definitions that would be worthwhile for managers to keep straight as they lead.

Crisp Thinking about Goals and Activities

Not so very long ago I asked a project manager what he was expected to accomplish in a project. What was his goal? Here’s the answer I got. “I lead the project team which means I interface with all the stakeholders to

define and agree on what the deliverables are ... I put together a critical path, get team buy-in, and then I make sure the team has the resources it needs to get the job done. In simple terms that’s what I’m expected to achieve.”

Is he right?

I say not. What he gave me was a list of what he needed to do in order to be successful — a list of activities — but that is not a definition of his goal. A goal is a definition of an end. A goal describes what is to be achieved. Activities, by contrast, define the means by which the goal will be attained.

For example, if I were a member of a ballet company — a fantasy for sure — my goal is not to dance ... that is an activity. However, my goal might be something like, “To improve the quality of artistic insight into the character of Romeo.”

Back to the project manager referred to earlier. The goal might have been, “To improve customer service quality.” This is a statement of an end to be achieved. It defines what is to be accomplished. Of course, complementing that goal might be a specific, measurable definition, an objective.

The benefit of clear, crisp thinking in this area is this: goals have the power to focus and motivate. Activities don’t have that same ability. They merely map out how a goal might be achieved.

Crisp Thinking about Policies, Procedures, and Practices

How many times in a work week do we hear this phrase, it’s our policy? Most of the time I hear it, the phrase is used to stop questions or further inquiry. In many cases, it is designed to get a customer or an employee to back off.

“It’s our policy not to post managerial jobs.”
“It’s our policy to issue credit but not refunds.”
“It’s our policy to issue expense cheques only once every month.”

Each time I hear that phrase, I cringe — not only because the phrase closes down dialogue but also because it is yet another example of

unclear thinking. There is a difference, a real difference, between a policy, a procedure, and a practice. But think how many times a policy is used to describe a procedure or a practice and, when that happens, how many times blank stares and confusion are the result.

A policy is practical wisdom that guides decision making. Procedures define the step by step process by which a policy will be lived. A practice is the customary or usual way things are done.

Here's an example of a policy. *All employees can expect a safe, non-threatening, and secure environment in which to work.* This is practical wisdom that ought to guide an organization's thinking and decision making about safety, security, and harassment. That policy statement becomes the foundation on which a set of procedures can be built in each of those areas. A practice is the customary way that individuals and teams act relative to the policy guideline.

What does this disciplined thinking do for us as managers and leaders? When asked questions about how something works, we ought to be connecting our procedure and practise explanations to a policy. Policy explanations provide reasons. So instead of saying, "It's our policy to be tough on employees who harass their work colleagues," ... whatever that means ... we can say, "Our policy is to provide every employee with a safe, non-threatening, secure environment in which to work. Therefore, we have developed a set of procedures that everyone can follow to deal with those situations in which they feel harassment has occurred."

Policies are fuller explanations ... they give reason ... they build understanding. They ought not to stop thinking or dialogue. Crisp thinking can help.

Crisp Thinking about Accountabilities, Responsibilities, and Authorities

Last week I asked a dozen managers to define what an accountability was, what a responsibility was, and what authority was. These are terms we use every day in

management. And I got 13 definitions! One person couldn't make up their mind and even suggested they all meant the same thing.

An accountability describes the outcomes a person is to achieve ... as in, "I am accountable for improving the quality of our customer asset." Yes, goals do define accountabilities.

Responsibilities define the duties and obligations that a person is expected to undertake in order to achieve the accountabilities. Back to the example. "Given that accountability, I am responsible for regularly completing a market segment analysis, identifying the high-payoff clients, and developing a set of strategies for selling to that target."

Authority describes the resources a person can use to take care of the responsibilities they have. Authority defines what can be spent, used, allocated, and committed.

What's the benefit of using crisp definitions? As a manager I understand that I must start with a definition of accountability ... it is that definition of what is to be achieved that drives what my responsibilities are ... then I can understand and define what authority I need or require. That thought process is dramatically different from what I see day-to-day in organizations. Often people start with either a definition of authority or a description of their responsibilities and then develop a hodge-podge that is nothing more than a wordy To-Do list. Or even worse, they tag authority to an existing level or title in an organization, then set out responsibilities and don't even test whether or not the authority is appropriate.

All that Jazz

Those who are less passionate than I about the virtues of crisp thinking tell me that such a structured approach limits innovation and creativity. Crisp thinking, I'm told, is too restrictive. I suggest not. To me, crisp thinking is like learning the musical discipline of scales. It is a foundation. From there, you have the freedom to play jazz ... without the discipline, creative thinking is nothing more than noise and a distraction.

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