

A quarterly publication service
produced by
LIVE Consultants Inc.

April 2001
Number 100



Getting It Done

From the Editor

Did you notice? I hadn't until one of the members of our team brought it to my attention: this is the 100th issue of Management Perspectives. Since July of 1976 when the publication first appeared and each quarter thereafter, we have covered topics from teamwork to leadership, from change to interpersonal communication.

Our aim is straightforward — provide you with two or three useful ideas, techniques, or insights in seven minutes of reading. We hope if we do that each and every issue, you'll have some practical, gentle reminders to complement the learning and development you're already doing. That's the benefit to you as a reader.

There have been benefits for us too. First, writing obliges clarity. It forces us to define exactly what we want to say ... which helps us when we are in the classroom or developing programs. Second, articles are an easy way for people to get to know us — how we approach particular content as well as our style. In fact, many of our current clients were first introduced to us here.

And yes, there will be a 101, and a 102, and many more thereafter, I suspect. We'll keep on as long as we all find this publication worthwhile and beneficial.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Inertia has momentum. And once an individual, a team, or an organization stalls, the amount of energy required to get it moving again is enormous. Of course, the question that begs to be asked is, "What causes the stall?"

Stephen's answer to that question is this: too much emphasis on talking and not enough focus on doing.

In this article, Stephen Baetz tries to re-balance talking with doing. The underlining assumption he makes is that all the thinking, planning, and talking that happens in an organization isn't worth anything until and unless it resolves itself into action.

Stephen Baetz is a partner of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization that sponsors this publication.

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button that links you to Management Perspectives.



Stephen Baetz

In Praise Of Doing

I feel compelled to set the record straight. And maybe this is something I should have done months ago, maybe even years ago. Who knows? I didn't then but I should've. So here goes.

We've got to do more and talk less.

Did you ever think that you'd hear me say that? Article after article in this publication, either directly or indirectly, I've pleaded with you to plan more, dialogue more, listen more, think more, strategize more. And I can't say that I regret the arguments I've made. However, I haven't offered the balance — except in a few fleeting references — that is required: a call to close the gap between what we talk about and what we do. In many organizations, there's a propensity to let talk substitute for action. The result is inertia.

T.S. Eliot in 1925 wrote a poem called "The Hollow Men." In it, he defines the issue: "Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the Shadow ... Between the conception/And the creation/ Between the emotion/And the response/Falls the Shadow." Within organizations, the shadow is layer upon layer of talk.

When faced with problems and opportunities, some people act as if discussion of the dynamics, getting to the root cause, and crafting strategies and plans is good enough. The shadow deepens when the talk turns to all the reasons why taking action is difficult or impossible. "I'd love to do it, but ..." or "Do you know what it would take to do that?" are all shadow-statements.

Talking is Encouraged

There's an old expression that asserts that "talk is cheap." The implication, I suspect, is that something worthwhile would have happened if talk had translated itself into action. The wise prophet asserted that, "You shall know them by their deeds" and Gandhi exhorted us to "Be the change you want to become." In Nike-ese style sloganeering we are told to "walk the talk." So at one level, each of those assertions declares the value of taking action, of doing.

Why, then, the apparent predisposition to talk?

My first observation is that talking is encouraged and rewarded. We encourage students to sound self-assured, fluent, persuasive; we reward those who sound clever, sound bright, sound articulate. That's often what we look for when we recruit. In programs and seminars within organizations, we create classroom environments where teams evaluate cases and make presentations to colleagues. We reward those that do it the best. Those who are promoted or assigned to special projects are the individuals who can "communicate with clarity" — even more prized are those who can do it with a vast array of PowerPoint slides that have components that fly-in, drop-in, wipe, or dissolve.

The second observation I have is that talking is far less risky than doing. Talking happens in the coolness of a meeting room where words can evaporate into thin air as quickly as they are offered. At the moment action happens, risk begins. Actions define; they draw lines. Actions allow others to observe how well you perform; there's no longer the safe haven of conversation where you can quickly take back what you've said.

Those are strong motivators to keep talking and, in doing so, delay action.

Vague Talk is a Sign

I have this half-baked theory that goes like this: the more anxious people are about taking action, the more ambiguous their talking will be. Sound too far out?

Here's what I've seen that supports that theory. When leaders don't want to make choices and/or resolve conflicts so they can head off in a united direction, they create mission, vision, and value statements bursting with biz-babble. The language is so vague that readers conclude that any interest can be pursued or any strategy embraced. Likewise, when individuals don't want to move from park to forward, they talk about how complex the issues are, how difficult the choices are, how

much other work there is to do, how few resources they have, how unreasonable the requests are, how ... you get the point I'm sure. Vague, complex talk is a signal that people are feeling anxious about the choices they have to make or the actions that have to be taken.

The antidote for this is not to *Just Do It* in the hope that some action, any action, will work. The negative results may cause people to be even more cautious and inert.

As I suggested at the beginning, I am not arguing for a swing in the other direction; I am arguing for a *balance* between talking and action — not that talking is more valuable than action or action is more valuable than talking.

How does one achieve such a balance? Consider these suggestions.

Suggestion #1: Straight talk

Any talking must be obvious, apparent, plain — devoid of empty, fuzzy, biz-babble. In conversations, people ought to understand what would be appropriate actions to take and, by contrast, what would be inappropriate. If a decoder ring is needed to figure out what is being said, action is not going to happen. The challenge, of course, is to provide clarity while, at the same time, not being so prescriptive that people stop using their good judgement.

Suggestion #2: Ask how

Ensure that in each meeting you move beyond the what and why questions to the how questions — “How would we do that?” “How is that going to happen?” How-questions ask others to define the next steps.

Suggestion #3: Follow-up

Create mechanisms that signal you care about action being taken. Insist that plans are written which define who is going to do what and by when. When due dates occur and you haven't heard what's happened, make a call, send an e-mail, or pay a visit. This is simply holding people accountable for the

commitments they have made and sends an undeniable message that action is as important as thinking, planning, and communicating.

Suggestion #4: Shine light into the shadows

Obviously, not all talk is pointless. Sometimes it leads to a decision that leads, in turn, to action. Other times the talk has no shape or direction. You can tell when this happens: language becomes muddled and issues are described as being much more complex than they really are.

Declare the time for talk has ended and move to a learning-by-doing strategy. Set a modest plan in place, act on it, and meet to define key insights and lessons learned: plan-action-reflection. For a defined period of time, declare a moratorium on meetings that merely chew cud and declare that the freed-up time is to be used to get it done.

Suggestion #5: Reward

Recognize and reward those who have learned to think, plan, talk, and do. Resist the temptation to provide kudos to those who can just do one of the four.

And Finally, Action

The comment that I sometimes hear from leaders is that the real challenge in their organization is not too little doing — a bias for action is well ingrained — it's too little talking. For you, I didn't have to set the record straight and argue for more doing.

However, if your organization has meetings which don't result in action or endless discussions about how complex the challenges are or informal gatherings where whine is all that is served or people who identify problems but never solve them, then a new balance needs to be struck — a balance where doing is an equal partner with thinking, planning, and talking.

There. I've finally set the record straight. Enough talking; I'm off to get a few things done.

Let's Stop Training And Let's Start Educating

Ever wonder why senior management views trainers as mechanics and the classroom as the service department where you send people to be fixed?

Senior executives didn't get that impression on their own.

Somehow or other that impression is there because our profession has helped to create it. Training has been used all too often as a quick fix. "Not performing? Let's send them on this training program, give them some basic skills, and see if it makes a difference."

It won't.

We owe it to our organizations to provide people with an education and get out of the quick-fix business. Education improves the quality of the organization's intellectual capital by not only building skills but also by building knowledge and the supporting attitudes. Education is a longer-term developmental process which helps people understand context and constraint. Education focuses as much on how to think as what to do. Besides, if the truth were told, most current performance problems are best addressed by the immediate manager on a one-to-one basis with specific coaching, support, and follow-up — not by mere classroom input and practice.

If our business is education, then a long-term development process should be what we offer and promise. To do that, we should

- be thoughtful about what attitudes, skills, and knowledge we help managers to learn,
- develop a variety of learning experiences — inside and outside the classroom — that complement one another,
- measure what contribution we are making to learning, and
- refuse to offer quick fixes.

If you would like some help in figuring out how you can best carry out the development work of an educator, please call us.

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.