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Success Fundamentals

From the Editor

Wisdom, it seems to me, occurs when insight meets experience. Maybe for that reason it is a description often attributed to those who are older and have more experience. The farm folks in this area lament the fact that we aren't wiser sooner. They reflect that "we get too soon old and too late smart." The suggestion appears to be that it would be far more useful if wisdom came earlier, if wisdom and experience could meet sooner.

How do we get wise sooner? Herb Caen with Leacock-like observation has commented that "a person begins cutting their wisdom teeth the first time they bite off more than they can chew." When we are stretched, when we are at our limits, when we're not sure whether we are able to pull it off, that's when we are forced to get wise quickly.

As management educators we are in the wisdom-building business; we use the smarts and insights of your organization and match it with the experience of others. The outcome? People and teams who are wise enough to help your organization prosper.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Perhaps success has become a bit of a dirty word because of its too close association with promotions and climbing the corporate ladder. The not-so-subtle association has been that you're successful, if and only if, promotion follows promotion.

Over the past year, Stephen Baetz asked participants on his seminars and programs to use their own definition of success, identify people who met that definition, and then describe them. This article recounts the seven behaviours they described most often.

Predictably it got him thinking about what he might add to the list and the result is, I think, quite fascinating.

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



Stephen Baetz

Take Heart

I know it isn't very scientific: no random sampling techniques to eliminate any evident biases, no focus group research to test the question, no effort to control other variables. But here's what I do. I ask program participants, who come back early from break, this question: "What do the employees who succeed in your organization do that others don't do?" I listen, scribble some notes, and look for patterns in the hope that there might be some insights worth passing on.

I have a dream — at least I think it's a dream — that arrives in the time that's suspended between sleep and consciousness. I'm with a group of familiar strangers who beg me with their silence to speak. I start with confidence; faces smile contentedly and then a word I've used a thousand times before stops me in my tracks because I'm not quite sure I know what it means. This morning the word was courage. For a moment I am convinced its root is the same as the french word for heart: coeur. A courageous act comes from the heart; it's not bridled by logic; it is And this is where I lose my way and I'm no longer sure I know what courage is.

There are a few surprises on the list that have emerged in the last year; most are as sensible as a hat in winter. Here's what I mean. **They focus on the goals to be achieved.** While others may be activity-centred, the successful have a clear appreciation of where they want to end up. Covey's admonition to "begin with the end in mind" appears to be taken seriously by those who are successful. At meetings they ask, "What's the purpose of this meeting; what are the outputs we need to have?" In leading projects, they bring the team back to the ends to be achieved or — in the language of project management — the deliverables.

They question. They want to know why; they want to know how; they want to know what, where, when, and who. These are people who are curious and have a strong desire to figure things out so they know "how it works around here." By description, they don't settle for easy

answers like, "That's the way we've always done it" or "It's easiest for us that way." By the same token, if they get a good answer, they work with it.

Is courage the ability to stand alone in counterpoint to prevailing wisdom? If that's the case, award the management badges of courage to Galbraith and Mintzberg — John Kenneth because he dared to point out the folly of using only economic measures to assess the health and vitality of an organization or a nation and Henry because he shuns the collective wisdom of using simple, private-sector models of profit and loss for what government does.

They learn. Not only are they the most likely individuals to take part-time courses, attend seminars, read, search the Internet, and volunteer for projects, they work with their eyes wide open. They observe what is going on in the marketplace in which they are working, they look for trends, they see what others have done that works well.

And based on observations and the new ideas they have gathered, they make changes in how they work. They make this direct connection: to learn is to change. That doesn't mean that they don't struggle at times with whether the effort is worth it, they do. Nonetheless, they get on with it, adjusting, modifying, accommodating, and adapting.

As you might anticipate, they rarely change for the sake of change; they change for good business reasons ... which, I suspect, connects back to their goal-focus.

The list goes on.

They take full responsibility. When I ask what this looks like day-to-day, the participants spend most their time describing what it doesn't look like. They don't blame; they don't look for scapegoats; they don't finger point. That definition is fine as far as it goes but it still doesn't describe what I'm likely to see when somebody does take full responsibility. "The project she had," one person offered, "was extremely visible, from the President on down.

We had an upset customer who wanted a fix yesterday and we weren't getting the support we needed from our technology suppliers. She and her team worked their buns off to get a patch and stop the bleeding at the customer site, 16-hour days ... that sort of thing. She went after the resources she needed and convinced people that extra effort was the right thing to do. She didn't wait. She owned it and she was determined to go beyond a patch to a long-term solution. She initiated."

That's clearer, I thought. They continued. "And not once did she point the finger at the technology supplier and moan about what they weren't doing, coulda done, shoulda done. She just focused on solving the problem."

Is courage the ability to endure with dignity when we have no control? If that is the case, the most courageous are found in hospitals, hospices, and hostels. Is courage found in the everyday acts of telling the truth, of speaking up when wrongs have been done, of being open despite the inconvenience it might cause? If this is true, children ought to step forward for their badge of courage.

They admit to the mistakes they make. This appears to be a kissing cousin to owning responsibilities. When they mess up, they own up. There's no hiding or sweeping it under the carpet. A mistake is nothing more than an invitation to learn, to find a better way the next time.

Do colleagues see an admission as weakness? Evidently not. The opposite appears to be true. It takes confidence to let others know you didn't get it right and that garners respect, if not admiration. "Admitting that you made a mistake," I was told, "is nothing more or less than telling the truth about what happened." Point taken.

This one won't surprise you. **They are empathic listeners.** Those who are less successful are self-absorbed, self-interested individuals who believe that the world should revolve around solving their aches and pains. The more successful listen: they hear the

content and the feeling in what others have to say. They hear needs; they hear ambitions; they hear fears, apprehensions, drives, and desires. They have the ability to be other-centred.

By listening empathically, they have a clear idea of how they might respond. Rarely is it with advice; rarely is it with a glib truism, rarely is it with a simple formula. Instead, they appear to suggest ... propose ... map out possibilities.

Somehow or other, they understand that advice is not taken easily and that suggestion is a wiser path to take.

They give credit. Those individuals who are most successful point to the contributions that others have made. They offer sincere-genuine-stand-alone-specific praise to others on the team and they make sure that managers hear about what others have done. They write appreciation notes; they send congratulatory e-mails; they post accomplishments; they always say thank-you. They make others look good for the value that has been added.

They shift the spotlight to others and ask them to take a bow.

Or is courage what happened in Kitchener last December 7th? There, a seven year old girl, who was undergoing treatment for a form of cancer, jarred her leg as she walked on stage with her choir. An everyday event for most of us but, because of the treatment, her bones were brittle and she broke her leg in two places. Without a pause, she carried on in front of an audience of a thousand people as if nothing had happened, singing her heart out.

They have heart. They are passionate, dedicated, hopeful individuals who carry on despite what they are facing. They resist any temptation to let the team down. They add their voice. They dig deep.

There is an unsettling that happens in dreams repeated. They haunt and chide. I push myself awake, more sure of what courage is and how it is a thread woven through success.

Focused On Development

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

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