

Common Sense

From the Editor

The other day, I tried to give one of my sons some advice. The kind parents give: the kind that ends with, "... if I were you."

But of course I'm not him. Smiling in that charming way of his, he said, "Mom, let me give you some advice about advice. Those who need it most, like it least."

I was impressed by the insight ... until I found it, attributed to Samuel Johnson, in a book of quotations on my son's floor. He must think his father and I dispense rather a lot of it, because he's armed himself with an arsenal of witty repartee about the subject. One that he had highlighted struck me as particularly true: "*Nobody can give you wiser advice than yourself.*"

At LIVE Consultants, we operate with that belief in mind. Through becoming familiar with our clients' operations and gently questioning them, we help them pull forth answers they already know, but may have momentarily lost in the clutter of day-to-day professional life. It is a consultant's job to put clients back in touch with their own goals and objectives — not to be so presumptuous as to give "advice."

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

In preparing his article for this issue, author Stephen Baetz asked everyone with whom he came in contact whether or not they believed they had good common sense. Almost all replied with an emphatic yes, but they were unable to provide a recent example to prove their claim.

Conversely, the one person who frankly admitted they were not known for their common sense was able to rattle off many instances where it had failed them.

This led to perhaps the biggest discovery of all: common sense is elusive. It's most visible when *absent*. It's something most of us assume we have, but *do we really?* We can't quite seem to put our finger on just what it is. So when we need to summon it, it vanishes.

Not anymore. Stephen Baetz, a principal of LIVE Consultants, the organization sponsoring this publication, gives us the questions to which

common sense *must* answer.



Stephen Baetz

Common Sense Ain't So Common

I have one of those Norman Rockwell paintings in my mind. A child is looking up with sheepish innocence, confused by father's exasperation. Dad has just walked into a mess and his arms are extended in disbelief.

You can hear the look: *Where is your common sense?*

I've been there as a son and promised myself that I'd never say that to my children. But I've broken that promise all too often. I hated the sting of that question — *Where is your common sense?* — as much as I detested *Think! What were you thinking of? Where was your head?* Yet shamelessly I've used them all. In management situations I've tried to be more diplomatic and I've found myself either biting my tongue or asking, "What brought you to that conclusion?" If the truth be known, I was really saying, "I can't believe you didn't use some common sense!"

In more reflective repose, I wonder if I accuse someone of not applying common sense when they make a decision that is different from the one I would make. I may use the question, "Where is your common sense" as a short form for I-thought-it-was-a- straightforward-decision-and-I-wouldn't-have- come-at-it-that way ... I-can't-believe-that-you- did. And, to be fair, sometimes I point the where-is-your-common-sense finger when I fail to realize that someone else may have had different information than I did. For example, when I see it's cloudy, I decide to take an umbrella when I leave home. On the basis of the information I have, that is common sense. Someone else may leave their home without an umbrella because they have heard a weather forecast which predicts clear skies within a couple of hours.

But with those situations aside, I still question where is prudent judgement, ordinary wisdom, practical intelligence, mother wit, naïve realism, tested insight ... whatever one chooses to call it ... where is it?

Has our dedication to sophistication driven us to conceptualized theory? Has our desire to be urbane minimized the value of practical, crafted answers? Do we somehow or other think there

are bonus points if solutions or decisions are complicated or obtuse?

I hope not.

I've concluded that most organizations, teams, and individuals would be better served if there was more common sense used.

But before I go any further, I need to respond to the question that comes back to me every time I make this argument. Does that mean you want everybody thinking the same? The question, when it is asked, wants to protect creativity and individuality. And indeed, we should. I only want people thinking the same on things that matter the most and things that matter the least. Everything else is fair territory for creative solutions, for innovative ideas.

Matter the most and matter the least, you say?

Those things which matter the most have to do with vision, values, and goals. For teams to be productive, everybody needs to be thinking the same about these issues. Those things that matter least are day-to-day practices like how letters are formatted or how titles are used. Everything between those extremes is the territory of creative, practical, down-to-earth, *common sense* decision making.

A Common Sense Primer

My experience tells me that we really aren't asked to make common sense decisions on a regular basis until we reach the work environment. Schools provide us with theory, concepts, and ideas. We're given formulas to work and problems to solve. But rarely is the request to make the solution practical ... or simple ... or even workable. Can you remember an instruction from any teacher that went, "Give me your common sense answer, something practical that I could apply easily tomorrow." Biz School may have asked for that but in the rare air of academia there was no way to put the answer to the absolute test of reality.

That being the case, I would like to offer a set of six questions that should help to generate more common sense solutions. Think of these as a common sense primer.

1. What is to be achieved?

Common sense solutions are solutions that are rooted in purpose. People can see what the solution is trying to accomplish. It appears to be commonly wise. There is a clear-headed logic between goal and action.

In very simple terms, implementing a solution just because everybody else is doing it does not display common sense. But implementing a solution that pushes us in the direction of a goal has common sense.

2. What would happen if ...?

Common sense solutions consider implications and impacts. People who use common sense know what affect their actions will have. They ask, "What would happen if we were to ...?" and then keep following that same line of questions with "And then what?" questions.

People with common sense in interpersonal situations seem to ask themselves, "If I were to say that now, what would be the impact on the other person?" Those without common sense seem to blurt out whatever is on their mind.

Common sense people are like good chess players. They see beyond a single move. They can see the ripples.

3. What is the difference between benefit and cost?

Common sense solutions have costs that are significantly lower than the benefits. Sounds basic, but think of how many times you have seen recommendations for action in which the costs exceeded the benefits or the costs hadn't even been considered at all!

Question 2 helps the common sense thinker anticipate what some of the costs may be — real dollar costs as well as the impact on people.

4. What is the simplest solution?

Common sense gravitates to simplicity because it recognizes that simple is most likely to be implemented. Hence the question, "What is the simplest solution?" If the simplest solution isn't sufficient for achieving the purpose, the next question is, "Why doesn't that simple solution work?" That question itself should help to define what complexity needs to be added.

5. What mistakes should be avoided?

Those who don't use a common sense approach have a marked inability to learn from the mistakes that either they have made or others have made.

As a result, we look at the solutions being proposed in disbelief and ask ourselves how they could fail to learn from history.

6. What are the chances this solution will work in the longer term?

People who have common sense know that it is counterproductive to have solutions that only provide a temporary fix. They look for solutions that can stand the test of time and opportunity because they know it is expensive to keep generating new solutions for each situation.

Those who lack common sense look for patches that will cover today's problem only.

Common Cents

I think it is too easy to conclude that common sense is something that you are born with and that some of us have and some of us don't. My observation is that common sense behaviour is learned — learned by asking the six questions. As a manager, when you ask the questions, you encourage — in a not so subtle way — common sense solutions ... solutions that can be implemented readily, are useful, durable, and profitable. Common sense makes cents.

Taking Your Own Advice

No one knows better than you what growth and development opportunities you should make available to people within your organization. You may have a myriad of questions at first, but you will soon find that the answers are within you.

When developing an education plan, think about the following. In combination, the points listed below will lead to success. The more “yes” options you can check, the greater the chance for plan effectiveness.

Read over the points carefully.

Does my education plan ...	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
1. consider current and emerging goals, values, and strategies?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. mesh with the attitudes, skills, and knowledge the organization wants to develop?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. identify all the populations that can benefit from development opportunities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. meet the needs of the target groups as they have been assessed and detailed?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. include a variety of learning strategies?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. have a set of standards for all the growth and development opportunities?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. have a practical focus to decrease the gap between information and application?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. have an overall theme that will link the ideas and build continuity?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. contain content and delivery techniques geared to the level of each target group?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. have a built-in evaluation process?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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