MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Managing Fear

From the Editor

Sometimes I forget that fiction doesn't necessarily mean that something isn't true — it only means that it hasn't happened. Often, this is where the most valuable lessons hide.

Dorothy proved that there is no Wizard; Alice learned that imagination doesn't need boundaries to be coherent; the Paper Bag Princess realized that you love people and use things.

Hamlet showed us the danger of being indirect; Romeo learned that there are some causes worth dying for; Olivia discovered the value of balance; Antony realized the power of public speech.

But the lessons are not confined to single instances; they often stretch entire bodies of work.

Leonard Cohen shows us that even in the dark there's the possibility for light; Margaret Atwood confirms that tradition isn't any good if it's not updated; Mordecai Richler proposes that the journey's more important than the discovery.

At LIVE Consultants we help organizations discover the lessons that will help them learn, grow, and ultimately, succeed.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

The Art of Management. Sure, we've heard it before and we think we know what it means ... but what if we shift the metaphor just a little? How does the meaning change?

With this in mind, our author explores a new take on the meaning of the *art of management.* He connects the actor to the employee and the manager to the director. He suggests some powerful lessons learned in the theatre world, that have a direct impact on leadership in the workplace.

Stephen concludes if success in theatre depends on the ability of the director to diffuse the fears of the actor, success in the business world depends on the ability of the manager to quiet these fears as well.

Stephen was assisted in the development of this article by Joel Baetz. Stephen is a principal of LIVE Consultants, Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.

Stephen Baetz

Their Fears Are Ours

Jim Schaefer often surprises me.

A former drama instructor at the University of Western Ontario, Jim at first appears to live up to the stereotypes that surround his theatrical world ... a little eccentric, a little unconventional, a little withdrawn from reality. But, that's only *at first* — first impressions aren't always complete.

As you get to know Jim, you realize that labels don't work. He defies definition. Routinely, he shows that the dumb-show has a message, that fairy tales don't have to be real to be true, and that imagination doesn't necessarily replace substance with shadow.

He rarely misses an opportunity to raise the curtain on insight.

Last week around the supper table, he did it again ... true to form. We were in the midst of a conversation about an assignment when he made a sharp 90° turn. "Actors only have seven fears they must stare down," he declared, "... just seven."

He did another 90° turn and was off chasing another idea. I remained thinking about his first observation. Seven? How could there just be seven? And the same seven for everybody? I needed more.

I only had to wait for another turn in the conversation. He did return. As Jim sees it, every actor has these seven basic fears:

- the fear of not being heard,
- the fear of not being seen,
- the fear of not being able,
- the fear of faulty memory,
- the fear of risk,
- the fear of criticism they give themselves, and
- the fear of criticism given by others.

According to Jim, if these are the fears for the actor, it is the director's job to help the actor face them. Amidst the decisions of set design, character, lighting, and interpretation, the director ought to create an environment where these fears can be dealt with. Fear can't play a part.

Jim left it there. The conversation continued, unassuming. As we were leaving, with a homage to both Colombo and Yoda, Jim made a quixotic parting observation, "The actor's fears are our's." These fears are not just the fears for any actor ... but for anybody. And in the workplace, the manager, like the director, has the responsibility to help others deal with these fears. Management, amidst the decisions of coaching, planning, and team building, must create an environment that lessens, if not neutralizes, fear.

But that landed me where I find myself a lot: at the crossroads of theory and practicality. As a result of reflection, I've come to these conclusions.

Facing the Fear of Not Being Heard

The parallel is straightforward. For actors, this is a fear of not being heard by the audience. For the employee, this is a fear of not being heard by others. Just as actors want the audience to hear their rants against King Claudius, their confessions of guilt, and their whispers to their forbidden lover, team members want others to hear their frustrations, apprehensions, and hopes. They don't need to be agreed with, just heard.

Yes, it does mean that we must listen actively, seeking to understand rather than oppose. And beyond that, it means creating opportunities where the members of our team can be heard by senior management, internal business partners, and suppliers. It means spending less time passing messages along and more time giving others a voice.

Facing the Fear of Not Being Seen

Nobody likes being invisible ... actors or employees. The actor doesn't want to be lost behind stage props or other actors just as team members don't want to be lost behind numbers, corporate objectives, or superstars. Everyone wants to be recognized for the role they play.

Managers, like directors, need to position others for visibility. On projects, it means orchestrating the action so the right people are front and centre at the right time; it means ensuring each person is in the picture and recognized for their contribution; it means encouraging the shy to step forward; it means letting others see who is doing the work.

Facing the Fear of Not Being Able

Actors may feel that they haven't had enough time to learn their lines or enough knowledge about the character. Whatever the reason, an actor can feel inadequate relative to the role they have. The parallel is clear. Team members can feel inadequate unless they have the skill, knowledge, and tools to get the job done.

What does this mean for the manager? Our responsibility is to ensure that our team members are coached, that they have software, hardware, mindware, and that they feel competent and confident to face their audiences.

Facing the Fear of Faulty Memory

It is memory that helps us understand what is appropriate and it is memory that builds a foundation for learning. The actor must not only remember plot, character, and context but also countless lines, cues, and stage directions. Likewise, team members must understand mission, values, strategies; they must call to mind culture, policies, and practices when making decisions; they must know what has worked and what won't work. And they must do this as they serve, communicate, problem solve, plan, and do.

For managers, it means that we must create and contribute to team and organizational memory ... by reminding others of the nature of the challenge, by telling stories about culture, by retelling tales of what worked and what didn't, by defining what is appropriate and what is not, and by helping others learn from experience.

Facing the Fear of Risk

The dangerous becomes feared when the costs outweigh the payoff. In the theatre, risk runs rampant. Each night, the actor does an emotional highwire act when they live out their interpretation of the character. They do this at the risk of looking foolish. Team members, like actors, know their work is a personal statement where everyone sees how well they can think and do.

For managers, this means that we have to help others assess what risks are worthwhile taking; it means creating safe environments where there is no price to be paid when reasonable risks are taken; it means taking risks ourselves; it means challenging precious paradigms.

Facing the Fear of Criticism From Self

People can be their own toughest critics. In some cases, we view ourselves with a harsher eye than others do. Often, we focus on what we could have done better instead of what we did do well.

For actors and team members alike, this fear manifests itself as self-doubt with questions like, "Will my performance live up to my own expectations? Will I be satisfied with my role? Do I need to make a larger contribution?"

A manager can help team members deal with these questions by presenting them with a clear and realistic picture of their performance. Straightforward and honest feedback will help the team members keep their performance in perspective.

Facing the Fear of Criticism From Others

For actors, this last fear makes them terrified of the curtain call or the reviews that appear the next day. They worry that the applause is insincere, will die away too quickly, or will be replaced by indifference. It is not a fear of going unnoticed, but a fear of going unapproved.

Likewise, team members want to be valued and appreciated for their contribution. It means that leaders must set up mechanisms where feedback can be shared; it means that no one is ignored for the role they play; it means that criticism must be positioned as an invitation to grow; it means that criticism must be constructive — concrete, specific suggestions of what could be done next time.

Challenging, I'd say — suggesting that the responsibility of a manager is to nurture others as they calm their fears. But then again, I expect no less from Jim.

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