

A quarterly publication service
produced by
LIVE Consultants Inc.

July 2002
Number 105



Success

From the Editor

After a roving life as a farmer, explorer, coal miner, auctioneer, and real estate dealer, Josh Billings began to write humorous sketches and homespun philosophies in rural dialect and soon became a well-known lecturer. In the 1860s, he was reputed to be more popular than his contemporary, Mark Twain. Here are few of his best.

“The rarest thing a man ever duz iz the best he can.”

“Common sense is the knack of seeing things as they are and doing things as they ought to be done.”

“There is nothing so easy to learn as experience and nothing so hard to apply.”

Why do I like those Joshisms? The wit for sure. Beyond that, however, they touch on some of what is important to us at LIVE Consultants: doing your best, using common sense, and helping people learn from their experience and the experience of others.

For further information about LIVE Consultants and the work we do with organizations, go to our website: www.liveconsultants.com.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

We have often observed that we learn as much from our clients as they do from us. There is no absolute way of knowing if that is true but we do know that our clients have taught us tons.

In this issue, Stephen Baetz shares seven insights that he picked up in the last three weeks of working with our clients. Some of them you may have heard before; others will be brand new. Either way they are gentle reminders of important ideas that ought to shape our behaviours inside and outside of the organizations in which we work.

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



Stephen Baetz

Well-worn Wisdom

I was in a planning meeting and one of the participants hit me with this observation right between the eyes. “Put your best people on your biggest opportunities, not on your biggest problems.” My first reaction was “Of course, that’s obvious.” And then immediately thereafter I recognized that it wasn’t so obvious. In reality, I, like many other managers and leaders I’ve observed over the years, put the best people on the biggest problems and then scratch our heads wondering why we haven’t made the gains we wanted to make on the opportunities that were in front of us.

At break, I asked the individual where she got that gem and the response back was both informative and challenging. “It was an observation made by Jim Collins in his 2001 book, *Good to Great*.” That was the informative part. She continued with the challenge. “Most of us know these things in our heart of hearts but act out of a burning convenience rather than wisdom.” That was the challenge.

My voracious desire to have explanations sent me off on an internal brainstorm of the reasons why we might act out of convenience rather than wisdom:

- ✓ the short-term focus of North American organizations on 90-day results limits reflection
- ✓ life is complicated enough so we go for easy, simple solutions
- ✓ in a busy world convenience is a superordinate value to wisdom
- ✓ we believe that life isn’t complex; so simple, convenient solutions will work
- ✓ we don’t know what wisdom is even when it is staring us right in the face

I stopped at five, recognizing that the list could go on and that each might be true to some degree. Maybe the more important task was to accumulate a list of insights that could add to our collective wisdom and shape how we act in organizations. So for three weeks I kept a list of what I heard people say or what I observed as I worked with my client organizations. You get the point, I’m sure. This is a starter list only and it has no pretences to be more than that. Although I do

invite you to challenge any on the list that you disagree with and to add others that you think are missing.

Mediocrity results when leaders become the prime reality.

What has brought us to the conclusion that the best leaders are enthused charismatics? Maybe we’ve arrived there because too many books and articles were written by authors who either assumed a sports coaching model (where bombastic enthusiasm is central to success) could be transplanted into all organizations or became devotees of the swashbuckling antics of an Iacocca or Welch.

Regardless of the reason, these leaders leave little or no room for others to express an alternative point of view or to challenge entrenched mindsets. The leader becomes the focus instead of the challenges facing the business. The net result is that people adopt a position that what-interests-the-boss-fascinates-me. They read the leader’s preferences rather than reading the environment; they concentrate on what is saleable rather than on what is appropriate. And all of this leads to mediocrity — not in the short-term but in the long run.

Success causes blindness.

The toughest clients I work with are those that are audaciously successful. They feel that they have found the formula for success and that all they have to do is replicate what they have always done. Why would you change if it is working?

Hubris sets in and with it comes blindness. *Everything* they do is assumed to be right: from policies to processes, from plans to practices. They can’t see how customer needs are morphing, how competition is changing, how employee needs are evolving, how regulators are adjusting, how suppliers are reshaping themselves.

These organizations seem to adopt a *Field of Dreams* perspective: build it and they will come — if we develop it, our customers will buy

it ... if we develop the program, our employees will love it ... if we launch this initiative, our competitors will have to follow.

By contrast, the more durable organizations question most when they are successful.

Read the second sentence.

Carol Shields was asked what she thought of the idea that most novels declared in the first sentence what the book was going to be about. "Not the first," she said, "the second." The first sentence introduces but the second sentence explains, it goes deeper.

This is also true in interpersonal communication; real meaning is nested after the introductory statement is made. The first sentence tells you about the symptoms; the second sentence tells you about the cause. The first sentence tells you about solutions; the second sentence about a problem.

Please recognize that I am speaking more metaphorically than literally. The point is that successful people move beyond what is first said to find the central reality.

If it sounds like it is too good to be true, it is.

Some might argue that this piece of wisdom was offered by a pessimist or even worse, a cynic. I'd suggest that it was a realist. A realist understands that every solution, every initiative, every program has an upside *and* a downside, has advantages *and* disadvantages, has pros *and* cons. If we only see the upsides, we should be cautious and think more about what the risks really are.

This is not an argument for excessive vigilance; it is an argument for keeping your eyes wide open and being realistic.

Never reject facts because of what they imply.

I've been in too many planning meetings where facts, fierce facts which cut to the heart of an issue, have been ignored or rationalized away

because of what the facts imply or suggest. Unfortunately, the organization and the individuals in it end up telling themselves stories which are more palatable or consistent with their view of the world and avoid dealing with the real challenges. Of course, the facts don't disappear and the problems sustain themselves or reappear in another form.

Get good then get fast.

A decade ago a manager might have made a choice when asked, "Do you want the job done well or do you want it done quickly?" Now the answer is yes to both. We want quick quality.

However, when individuals learn new tasks, quick quality isn't going to happen. Therefore, the order has to be "good" first and "fast" second.

When coaching, managers ought to reassure individuals who are learning a new task that learning how to do it right is the first priority. Successive repetitions of *right* build confidence and then speed follows.

If you don't want to be treated like a machine, don't act like one.

When I first heard this insight, it sounded so, well let me call it like I felt it, so tactless. Until I allowed myself to hear the meaning in the message.

Machines don't think. They only decide as they have been programmed to decide. They have trouble dealing with ambiguity. They find it next to impossible to do creative problem solving. They take initiative only when told to do so. They define most problems they face in the terms that they have been designed for. They can't demonstrate passion, commitment, persistence, gratitude, empathy, kindness — all the qualities which build trust.

The implication is evident; if I don't want to be treated like a machine, I must take initiative, learn about issues outside of my current area of expertise, see implications, deal with ambiguity, and engage in all the behaviours which build trust.

Your Growth And Development

Our website has a new look!

<http://www.liveconsultants.com>

Reacquaint yourself with who we are in *About LIVE*, the services we provide in *Our Services*, new kernels of wisdom in our *Intellectual Popcorn*, and our most *Frequently Asked Questions*.

Watch and listen to Stephen Baetz and Marilyn Baetz talk about what LIVE has to offer.

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