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Success

From the Editor

There is a Chinese proverb that says, “Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” Like many pieces of wisdom, it has the ability to get us thinking at several different levels.

At one level, it is about being accountable — taking action to change what is not desirable and avoiding grumbling about what currently exists.

At another level, it speaks to the wisdom of seeing clearly, opening up what has been out of sight.

Both explanations work for me.

As a team of management educators, we not only help leaders learn how to be accountable but we also help them to see clearly what they may not have been able to see before.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

This is the time of year when we are finally free of all the graduation ceremonies, from elementary, secondary, and post-secondary to recitals for dance and banquets for sports. All the speeches have been made; words of encouragement offered.

In this edition, Stephen shares a graduation speech he’d like to offer to MBAs as they take on leadership responsibilities in their respective organizations. He offers his wry observations about success that he is sure aren’t covered in business school curricula.

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



Stephen Baetz

To the Graduating Class of ...

Mary Schmich started to write a regular column for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1992. Unexpectedly she became famous when one of her columns, five years later, became an Internet favourite. It offered wry counsel to college graduates. “Wear sunscreen,” she wrote. “The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists, whereas the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience.” Later in that same column she observed, “Advice is a form of nostalgia.”

Her advice on advice is provocative. She got me thinking about whether the world changes so much that only new solutions will work. Is advice merely wishful thinking that the world hasn’t changed? Is suggesting solutions that have worked elsewhere therefore folly because the solution won’t match with circumstance? That got me thinking about another observation: the more things change, the more they stay the same and the complementary comment from classicists that there is nothing new under the sun. These latter two caused me to wonder whether life is merely a kaleidoscope of reruns. If that’s the case, an ability to know which rerun we’re in would be an asset to anyone dispensing advice.

I need to thank Mary on two accounts. First, she got me thinking about the role and value of advice. And second, she prompted me to muse about what I might say to a graduating class of MBAs who, with credentials in hand, will be joining the ranks of organizational leadership. I suspect I would use the same words for individuals who are moving from the frontline to a supervisory position.

So here goes. And yes, I do appreciate that there is irony in what I am about to say, given that I haven’t settled on whether advice is useful or only a form of nostalgia.

Wear comfortable shoes. I know that few, if any, of your profs ever shared this with you. They were probably more concerned about teaching you how to do regression analysis, read a balance sheet, or calculate market capitalization. The reality is that you’ll have to think on your feet, land on your feet, and dance

when others ask questions that are designed to impress. Not to mention that you’ll have to run hard, race against time, and step up to the plate. Trust me, wear comfortable shoes.

Use language so you can’t be misunderstood. “Since our FTEs had bandwidth, we in-sourced the initiative and leveraged their greyware which meant we didn’t have payroll orphans” scores a zero on a clarity scale. If you want to have a second language that counts for something, learn French, Spanish, Mandarin, German; you’ll be better served. If you insist on using such language, target one job — the Governor of the Bank of Canada.

Laugh out loud at least once a day. If you don’t think there’s anything to laugh about, check your pulse and eyesight. Every organization has the stuff of comedy — irony, pretence, absurdity, unintended consequences, and contradictions — that can be seen if you take the time to observe the world you’re in. When you laugh, do it at the situation and not at people. Laughing at people creates *we-them* divides that work against the possibility of having a work environment that is fun.

Remind yourself that there is more than one best way. There is nothing more dangerous than a person with a single idea. At the same time, don’t give in to ideas that are just plain stupid so everyone on the team can get along.

Listen for what is not said. The unspoken story is usually more revealing than the one you are being told. As you listen, ask yourself, “What caused the story to take the shape it is taking?” Think about that question and you will uncover assumptions, mental models, and biases.

Breathe.

Talk with people who have points of view different than your own. You can’t learn from people who know what you know and believe what you believe. If you want to feel warm and comfortable, buy yourself a duvet. If you want to grow and be smarter tomorrow than you are today, live with the fact that people who challenge your thinking will cause you to feel disquieted. That’s good. You’ll end up with ideas and solutions that are ten times better than if you had just talked with people who

think like you do or have the same training as you do.

Read the situation. Good ideas die and are buried before they see the light of day because someone has censored an idea in their head with a killer-phrase like, “I don’t think they’d ever go for it” or “I don’t feel that’s what they are looking for.” Propose what is right for the situation and not what you think is saleable, or least offensive, or easiest, or what has always worked. Once you’ve got the right idea for the situation, then you can figure out how to make it workable. From my perch, there’s too much what-interests-the-boss-fascinates-me thinking going on within organizations.

Think. If you don’t want to be treated like a machine, don’t act like one. Analyze, conceptualize, synthesize, reason, ruminate, anticipate. And after you’ve done that, do. Then assess, rethink, revamp, and redesign.

Share.

Treat people as they want to be treated. Avoid treating people the same way you want to be treated. The assumption of the golden rule is that your needs and their needs are the same. It’s not always the case. Deal with others on their terms.

Find balance. Let me guess. This wasn’t covered in B-school either. You weren’t asked to read *For the Love of a Good Woman* or *Fall on Your Knees* or poetry by Cohen, Layton, Purdy, or Dudek, or listen to music or attend theatre or dance or even build relationships with life-partners. If you don’t do those things or learn how to do those things well, you’ll only know a very small piece of life and you won’t be able to come to the challenges of work refreshed.

Worry only if it helps. Granted, it never does. Action does. Worry doesn’t. Worry is highly over-rated, indeed, over-used as a human emotion. It has the ability to cause people to stall and be unbearable.

Say you’re sorry when you screw up.

Know your strengths. There are enough times in the workplace where you will feel bruised, aching, and hurt. Some of that will happen because of what others say and do and some of it will happen because of our own

fears about not being good enough or apprehensions that you have about being a fraud because you don’t know it all. Having a list of what your strengths are should alleviate some of the soreness in the bruises.

Play fair.

Do what’s difficult. Anybody can do what’s easy. That’s why it’s called easy. Dealing with the difficult requires character — stamina, determination, integrity, and honesty. This doesn’t mean making things difficult. It merely means that when a difficult situation is sitting in front of you, get to it.

Minimize the number of times you use if and but. If is a backdoor. It makes communication and commitments seem so tentative. “If this doesn’t happen, I’ll come through.” If offers excuses: “We could have done a better job if we had more time.” And but. What can you say about but? But is nothing more than a verbal punch. “I hear what you’re saying, but ...” Too many ifs and buts in a relationship and trust diminishes.

Do what you say you are going to do. Make a promise and keep a promise.

Get 8 hours sleep. When you’re doing a challenging job, you need all the rest you can get so you can stay focused and give the tasks at hand all the energy they deserve.

Avoid surprises. Surprises may be alright on your birthday or anniversary. Rarely do they carry the same emotional content in the workplace. When you know that something isn’t going to work out as planned, let people know. Often there’s time to make alternative plans. Surprises at the point of delivery increase disappointment and frustration with those who were expecting something different.

Ask for help. We all come to the limits of our knowledge and expertise; there’s no way in a complex world that we can know it all. When you’re at your limits, put your hand up and ask others for the help you need.

Give more credit than you take.

And don’t forget to wear comfortable shoes. I know I’ve said that already. However the small pleasures are so underrated. Tell me, what feels better than shoes that fit well? Okay. Maybe a polished pair of shoes that fit well.

Reading Lists

More and more individuals are taking responsibility for their own learning and development, understanding that this will help to ensure their lifetime employability. To help you in that pursuit, you may want to go to our website — www.liveconsultants.com — and click on *Learning Resources*. That will take you to a section of the site where you will find reading lists in areas like:

- ❖ Change
- ❖ Strategy
- ❖ Employee Engagement
- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Teams
- ❖ Employee Development

We've purposefully chosen what we feel are the best articles and books on the subject.

And who knows, while you're at the site you may find other materials that will help your learning and development.

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

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