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Outcomes

From the Editor

There's a Chinese proverb that goes "If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow." Although the observation is talking in particular about anger and regret, its complementary counsels are many and are equally worth hearing: anticipate, focus on what really matters, evaluate whether what you do or say will help or harm, choose your battles, and be thoughtful. Like all communication, the messages are many.

When we work with people, teams, and organizations, we listen for the layers of meaning in the communication. By doing so, we are able to enrich the dialogues we have and increase the chances that we will get to the stuff below the surface.

Since 1974, we have been helping organizations go deeper and get to the issues that are most important.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Chances are you have had the experience as an individual or as a team of wondering, "How in heaven's name did we end up here?" Often it can be 180 degrees from where you wanted to be.

"Welcome, once again," Stephen writes "to the world of unintended consequences." He suggests that if we are going to avoid ending up with what we don't want, it is a wise idea to figure out the reasons why we often do. He offers three reasons and then makes several observations about what we can do to avoid the disappointment of unintended consequences.

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



Stephen Baetz

Anticipate What You'll Get

I was thinking about why some mornings come earlier than others and was being eased into the day with news, weather, and sports. The only bright spot in that trio was the weather which was predicted to be moderately warm without rain. There was little difference between the news and sports: both told stories that encourage the cynics among us. *Geist* (I like the poetry it sprinkles between the fiction) was going to be my next refuge in an effort to slow myself into the day when the host of the radio morning show declared that just after the traffic report they'd be talking with Gerald Caplan. Always worth listening to, I thought. He did a Ph.D. in African history, taught, was a backroom player for the NDP, wrote a stunning report on the Rwanda genocide, and has been part of a team of experts evaluating, for the UN, its new agenda in Africa.

Evidently in an article in the *Globe and Mail* the previous day, he had raised several questions around Bob Geldof's Live 8 initiative to raise awareness prior to the G8 conference in Scotland. Then in his typical let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may delivery, he said that North America and Europe were more "part of Africa's problem than Africa's solution." The sound I heard was the collective sucking of air from well-intentioned listeners who were already packing their bags for a weekend pilgrimage to Barrie in their SUVs, hoping the experience might rival Woodstock as a turning point in how we see the world.

How could we be contributing to the problem? We send aid and we're trying to get our politicians, the WTO, and the World Bank focused on the right issues. Come on, Gerry!

The host asked for evidence and Gerry obliged with several examples. He noted how we subsidize our farmers and agri-business who over-produce and then dump the excess at extremely low prices into African countries who then come to the conclusion that it's cheaper to buy offshore than it is to produce it themselves. As long as that happens the countries stay poor. In short, our "generosity" encourages poverty.

Welcome, once again, to the world of unintended consequences. Of course we can't

see what we are doing as anything but right because we're blinded by our own generosity or the feeling that we are doing good.

If I understood the interview accurately, Gerry wasn't arguing that we shouldn't raise awareness of what is happening in the 53 countries which are part of Africa or in other parts of the world. His position is that we should be *more* aware and understand the complexities that do exist. Nor was he arguing against generosity.

The thrust of his argument is that we should think carefully about what is involved — the dynamics and dimensions of the problems — and the action we take as well as understand the impact our actions will have on others.

Since that morning and that interview, I have been thinking about unintended consequences in the worlds I inhabit. In particular, I have been wondering why do they occur and what can I do (or sometimes what can we do) to get the outcomes we really want.

Sound Familiar?

What are some examples of unintended consequences?

Example A: A business wants to attract customers and provides an exceptional level of customer service in the hope customers will return and tell colleagues. Customers do appreciate the value-added service and, along with many others who are attracted by the service quality, use the services of the business. However, with increased volumes and the subsequent pressure on staff, service quality slips and customers stay away because "I can no longer get the service I had before."

Example B: Team members have a desire to create a highly collaborative and productive work unit. When differences do occur, nobody says anything because they don't want to upset the team chemistry. Disappointments are never talked about, frustrations never put to rest. The result? Collaboration diminishes and people avoid team play because "it's too difficult to deal with people like that."

Example C: In an attempt to help employees learn and be strong contributors who can be

decisive and take initiative, we provide them with ample learning opportunities, from seminars to coaches, from special assignments to job swapping. The consequence? Employees now feel entitled and wait for opportunities to be given to them.

Example D: In a major change, information is withheld because there is a belief that it will make people feel anxious and perhaps distrustful. Sometime later, however, they find out about the information. As a result, trust drops because they believe there might be other information that they aren't being told about.

The list could go on. As I've already suggested, the intriguing question is *why* do we get the opposite of what we were hoping for? These are my hunches.

Reason 1: We fail to realize that all good intentions spin out of control.

If we were able to ask Will Shakespeare what the nature of a tragic character is, no doubt his reply would be that overstated strengths turn themselves into weaknesses. The tragedy hidden in good intention is that we write it too large and thereby lose any sense of balance or perspective on what else we should be attending to. The organization that provides all the learning opportunities and requires nothing of the individual *and* the business dedicated to service quality and can't see that it has to build infrastructure to handle the growth are two examples of this.

Reason 2: We lose track of what outcomes we want.

We can become so fixed on executing a plan and checking off items on our To-Do list that we don't pause to evaluate whether we are getting what we really want. Either that or we don't take the time to define *in precise terms* what we mean when we declare we want a particular outcome. The collaborative team may not have taken the time to define what it really takes for a team to be collaborative and team members assumed that burying conflict

and ignoring differences was the way to get there. If they had taken the time, they might have come to the realization that no conflict yields nothing more than group-think and that honest-to-goodness collaboration relies on the ability of the members to resolve the differences that exist in all human relationships.

Reason 3: We make self-interested decisions.

More often than not, at the point we make decisions that are self-serving, an unintended consequence will occur. Our need to protect others as in Example D is a prime case. Gerry would argue, I think, that our need to feel good about how generous we are is what prompts us to dump excess. More accurately, it's acting on our self-interest *and* failing to anticipate the impact that it will have on others that yield the unintended consequence.

Avoiding the Disappointment

Clearly I'm not making an argument that we shouldn't be generous, that we shouldn't act in a vigorous way on business strategies, that we should be totally selfless, or that we ought not to provide people with opportunities. My contention is that if we are to avoid the disappointment of unintended consequences we must

- ✓ define with precision what we want to achieve and what is implied by that definition,
- ✓ resist the temptation of merely meeting our own needs or acting to purely make ourselves feel better,
- ✓ anticipate what impact the decision or action will have on others as well as what effect it will have on existing systems, processes, or practices, and
- ✓ assess periodically whether the outcomes we are getting are consistent with what we hoped we would get.

If we do these things we will still get some unintended consequences ... but far less often.

Winning the Future

Simply put strategic planning is figuring out how to win the future. It allows you and your organization to

- identify what business you are in,
- determine what your organization wants to become,
- specify the moral benchmarks by which everyone in the organization will judge their behaviour, and
- decide how your vision of success will be achieved.

Those are the elements of a strategic plan. The actual development process for a strategic plan is one that companies often overlook, make too complex, or approach without any degree of practicality.

For that reason, we offer a strategic planning process that asks teams to come to consensus on the answers to several fundamental questions. One of the end results is, of course, a strategic plan ... but more important, that strategic plan

- provides an analysis of your internal and external environment,
- compels you and other employees to think strategically about the opportunities, challenges, and problems the organization faces,
- is straightforward and practical and, therefore, more easily understood and implemented, and
- makes it easy for members of the organization to contribute to a successful future.

Strategic planning doesn't have to be mysterious and strategic plans don't have to be confusing and obscure.

They help shape the organization's day-to-day operations. They guide every action and decision. They offer a compelling vision of where the organization wants to find success. They help win the future.

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

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