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# MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

## Testing Assumptions

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### From the Editor

Albert Schweitzer was once asked how he could ever think of giving up his life as an incomparable church musician and physician to work in relative obscurity in Africa. His response was simple and wise. "My life is my argument."

Nothing more was said. Nothing more could be said.

At the early part of this century, Schweitzer understood that our actions tell the most about who we *really* are. Our behaviour tells the story about our values, our beliefs, our morality.

Dr. Schweitzer poses an interesting question in his observation: What kind of argument have we made in the actions we have taken? Likewise, for managers and leaders, the question is the same: In our actions what is the argument we are making? Is it an argument for respect of the individual, fairness, quality, achievement, and contribution?

Helping individuals and organizations make the right argument is what we do at LIVE Consultants. We do this through education and development programs as well as through team building and change management strategies.

*Marilyn Baetz, editor*

### About the Author and the Article

Most people have had the experience of looking at something for years and seeing the same thing and then looking again and seeing something different. There is something oddly disturbing about that. You wonder why your perception has changed and why you couldn't see, what you now see, earlier.

That is what has happened to Stephen Baetz in this article.

He has questioned some of the old pieces of wisdom that most of us thought were tried 'n true and asked us to look again.

Besides, Stephen argues, "... the world won't fall apart if you ask a few more questions, kick a couple of sacred cows."

Stephen Baetz is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.



*Stephen Baetz*

# Myth-Takes

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Do you think it's a matter of middle age? You know what I mean ... this thing about getting philosophical.

Could be. It happened to my grandfather and it happened to my dad. When they thought the distance forward was about the same as the distance back, they got real philosophical. They evaluated everything. Questions were more frequent than answers. They tested every old assumption. Nothing was tried 'n true.

Now it's happening to me.

There are things that I thought I would never question, that I am. Maybe that's a freedom that comes when you have passed a few of life's tests and come out okay. It gives you confidence. Not a cocky confidence that you see in the swagger of youth but a ... a ... well, dare I use the word, a *mature* confidence that says that the world won't fall apart if you ask a few more questions, kick a couple of sacred cows.

Yes, I'm getting philosophical. It may be a good thing too 'cause I think there are a lot of old myths, clichés, and doubletalk that need to be questioned. I've come to call them myth-takes because, if we believe them *in their entirety*, we may end up making less of a contribution than we could. The trouble with most of these myths is that they are partially true ... that's why we believed them in the first place ... but we need to be careful not to swallow them hook, line, and sinker.

## **Myth-Take #1: Any job worth doing is worth doing well.**

The seductive part of that statement is that most of us have this basic desire to do our best. There's nothing wrong with that **but** when we think that *every* job has to be done to perfection we exhaust ourselves unnecessarily.

There are some jobs that are not worth doing at all. There are other jobs that ought to be done to perfection. And in between those two points, there are jobs that are still worth doing but only to a minimal standard of performance. Sometimes, good enough is good enough.

It's like doing your gardens. It's a job worth doing ... but does it have to be done to perfection? I suspect for most of us, it doesn't. Same thing in the work environment. There are always *garden jobs* where good enough is good enough and it doesn't have to be done so well, that it's perfect.

Wise managers know their gardens.

## **Myth-Take #2: In every game, there are winners and losers.**

The empty lots and frozen ponds of our childhood may have brought us to the conclusion that in every game, every interaction, there are winners and there are losers.

I concluded on those lots and ponds that a win for me could only happen if *you* lost. I win at your expense or you win at my expense.

As we grew older, the competitive games shifted from pond to marketsquare. The assumption was the same: there are limited resources to go around and our task is to fight our competitors for what little there is so that we win and they lose.

The older I get, the more I realize that I don't have to win by causing you to lose and you don't have to win by causing me to lose. If both you win and I win then more resources will be created.

Now true enough, some people won't choose to win. They'll select strategies and tactics which won't carry the day and they'll lose. But they'll lose 'cause they weren't smart, not because it's only possible to have a single winner.

## **Myth-Take #3: People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.**

I guess that advice was given to each and every one of us like a psychological dose of cod liver oil when somebody thought we were being too critical or judgemental. Who didn't feel the wag of the finger and the message, "When you're perfect, then you can criticize."

That shut most of us up ... *unfortunately*.

I say unfortunately not because I want to

champion the idea that we should be mean-hearted and nasty but because if you can only speak up if you're perfect, nobody would be talking.

Doggone it, criticism is helpful ... leastwise, it has the possibility to be helpful ... and there doesn't appear to be much sense in trying to squash critical comment if it has the potential to make something better.

Here's the point. When we do criticize, the obligation we all have is to focus on the problem or the solution and not on the person who offered the idea.

I say, throw stones at dumb ideas but take careful aim ... so you miss people.

#### **Myth-Take #4: What you don't know, can't hurt you.**

Now there's a dandy.

This is to argue that ignorance is bliss and that by keeping our head in the sand we will be better off.

Maybe that point of view worked when *father knew best* ... or at least we believed he did ... and we all depended on him to take care of us. But in more complex times, not being knowledgeable, aware, and up-to-date about what is happening around you is to go the way of the dodo bird.

I suppose it is possible to choose not to be aware but not knowing is hardly a sufficient defense when failure happens.

What bothers me about this myth, as well, is the undertone that it may be wise to purposefully keep someone in the dark or to deceive somebody because what does it matter if they are none the wiser.

That's nothing more than arrogance that resolves itself into resentment and distrust.

#### **Myth-Take #5: Think big.**

This is a challenge. On the one hand there is good intention to the statement. It encourages people not to limit their horizons.

There's a but, however.

With this myth comes a whole load of baggage which suggests that big is better, big

is wiser, big is more functional.

The reality in today's environment is that we have to do more with less, we need to be smaller, leaner, more flexible, more responsive.

The more important imperative for managers is, "*Think.*"

#### **Myth-Take #6: Don't get buried in the details.**

This is one of the toughest for me. I've always promoted the idea of standing back, seeing events in perspective, and establishing priorities. Not only that, but with a desire to create environments which empower I didn't want to meddle and second guess. There's nothing wrong with any of that.

I have come to learn, however, that if I'm going to be successful in implementing change, I have to sweat the details, the little stuff. I have to sweat the details during planning and I have to sweat all the small pieces in the implementation. If the sole preoccupation of a manager is on the big picture, they are bound to sacrifice the quality that is important to a customer.

Now here's a statement of the obvious: being concerned about details doesn't mean that you push others aside and do the job for them. It does mean that everyone has to pay attention to the details that effect quality.

#### **Myth-Take #7: Practice makes perfect.**

When I was in school as a kid, I probably heard that phrase at least once a week. So often, I believed it without questioning. Of course, practice makes perfect.

Or does it?

If I practise the wrong skill, all the practice in the world isn't going to make that wrong skill right.

A wise manager knows that *practice makes permanent*.

Yes, I have become philosophical. It seems to run in the family. It is wise, I realize, to have myths-understood than be myth-taken.

# Education Plan

There are two major challenges facing Human Resource Development professionals:

- ensuring buy-in from both senior management and program participants, and
- focusing available resources.

Meet those challenges and everything else seems easy!

Our education planning process can help you with those challenges.

The starting point is a series of interviews with the leadership of the organization to identify the current and emerging goals, strategies, and values of the organization as well as what skills, attitudes, and knowledges they feel people will need in the future.

This data is coupled with results from a needs analysis survey of the participants themselves. Both pieces of input form the foundation for planning by a Policy and Strategy Group.

The plan that does evolve targets how development dollars should be invested. Best of all, there is a plan that has commitment.

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