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MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Leadership

From the Editor

Do you know who Ellen Parr is? I don't. I do know that she can get you thinking. One of her quotes caught my attention recently. "The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity." See what I mean? You want to immediately say she's right. You might even be able to give some personal examples to illustrate the point she's making. I did. And I went on to declare how curiosity is a parent of innovation along with necessity. Curiosity is essential, I asserted, to a healthy intellect and to smart teams.

Then I read the second sentence again: there is no cure for curiosity. Is that true? I don't think it is. There is much that can get rid of curiosity: lack of encouragement, overwrought caution, authoritative answers, busyness, ridicule, poor information, institutionalized processes ... just to name a few.

Unfortunately that cure is worse than the discomfort that curiosity can create. If the truth be known, curiosity is a precursor to growth for both individuals and organizations.

At LIVE Consultants Inc. we work to increase an organization's CQ — Curiosity Quotient — in the workshops we design and deliver as well as the coaching we do.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

"Just get with the program." I'm sure there are times when we've all heard those words and felt the obligation to give up an idea or a point of view in favour of a prevailing paradigm. To the gifted and the insightful, the advice is given regularly.

"I moved," Stephen writes in this article, "to considering what any individual ought to do when they have an insight, a perspective, a point of view, an approach, a plan, whatever, that they think is important or valuable but others think is ... well, foolish." The result is seven suggestions that have as much to do with managing your own reaction as they do with how to deal with others.

Stephen is a partner in LIVE Consultants, the organization which sponsors this publication. For more information about us, go to <http://www.liveconsultants.com>



Stephen Baetz

Life In The Land Of The Blind

I was in my car but I can't remember where I was going. It was a Sunday afternoon. That I remember. I was deciding whether to listen to Tapestry on Radio One or see what was on Radio Two. The guest was a McLuhan, Marshall's son, and it was the same voice, same type of reflection, same style. He was talking about his father's seemingly paradoxical nature and his penchant for challenging, for taking the other side. It was back to the future. It could have been the 60s and I could have been a student. There was no evidence that neither was true.

And then, a McLuhanism: In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is seen as a fool.

What? I thought he was going to say that in the land of the blind the one-eyed-man is king. Isn't that how it usually goes? Surely the people who can see, in even a limited way, are the people that others follow. Surely some insight is better than ... and then I got stopped in my tracks. I understood where he was going. People who have different perceptions are often seen as being out-of-it, of not getting it, of being in their own time zone, even of being from another planet. And we often admonish them to "get with the program" which, it seems to me, is just another way of saying, "See it our way."

I found myself wondering what it would be like to see the world differently than others do, not just on occasion, but all of the time. It's the burden of genius, I suppose. Maybe if it happens to you constantly, you grow another skin as a way of protecting yourself from the contagion of conformity. Perhaps you get used to running the race in front of others and you satisfy yourself with the knowledge that others will, eventually, catch up. Maybe there is some satisfaction in knowing that your present is other people's futures.

From thinking about the challenges faced by the exceptionally gifted who have the ability to see now what others will see later, I moved to considering what any individual ought to do when they have an insight, a perspective, a point of view, an approach, a plan, whatever, that they think is important or valuable but others think is ... well, foolish.

The ideas that I came up with — that I now offer as suggestions — have as much to do with managing the pressure to "get with the program" as they do with helping others see what you see.

Suggestion #1: Double-check.

Because you may have a different point of view than others, doesn't necessarily mean that you are right or that the point of view is more meritorious: it only means you have a different point of view. So double-check. Look at what you have and reassess its value.

Test what you have with questions like these: *What insight does this give us that we didn't have before?*

What problems can we now solve?

What additional benefits does this provide?

What growth will this produce?

What new opportunities will be created?

If the only thing that your perspective has going for it is that you created it, give it up, and yield to the wisdom of others. On the other hand, if your point of view is more valuable or worthwhile, keep going.

Suggestion #2: Filter the Noise.

My experience is that few, if any, ideas that challenge traditional thinking or the-way-we've-always-done-things are welcomed with open arms. Not very often do people say, "I know that flies in the face of everything I've known or done and even though it is the first time I've heard that, I'm in." Quite the contrary: new ideas are frequently labelled as are the people who have offered them. The polite labels are *radical*, *different*, *eccentric*, or *off-the-wall*. The more condescending are *out-of-touch*, *impractical*, or *disconnected*. The down-right hostile are *goofy*, *spacey*, or *stupid*.

If you know that response is going to happen, it is a little easier to deal with when it does. Remind yourself that the attack is happening because it threatens. Your perspective may threaten a comfortable habit, a familiar explanation, an easy solution. Then stay calm

by reminding yourself of the value of your contribution and that you don't have to accept what others offer you. You can't stop them from saying what they say but you can choose whether or not you believe what they are saying.

Whatever you do, avoid giving what you got. Shun labelling — traditionalists, Neanderthals, protectionists, and so on — and don't distance or disengage — go silent, end the dialogue, don't resort to jargon.

Suggestion #3: Listen to the Critics.

Invite those who are attacking your ideas to tell you exactly and precisely what they don't like about what you have offered or suggested.

And then listen for the need that is hidden in the criticism. Ask yourself,

What will they lose if they embrace this perspective?

What are they hoping to have answered?

What's missing for them?

What would make them comfortable?

What are the beliefs or values that undergird what they currently know?

Those questions should help you understand their needs and what you have to say if you want to be heard.

Just at the moment you think you understand where they are coming from, ask for more criticism so you can hear the issues which are causing the anxiousness.

This isn't easy to do because what you want to yell is, "Don't ya get it! This will help us! There is nothing, I mean nothing, to fear." And after you've vented, it feels like you'd like to fire idea after idea at them until you wear them down. Not wise; even counterproductive.

Suggestion #4: Re-present.

Once you know why your perspective is being rejected, re-present your point in a way that meets the needs of your critics. Talk to them about the issues that they need to hear about; explain in their terms what isn't yet understood; give them what they haven't yet got.

Of course, packaging is everything — okay, if not everything, packaging is as important as the idea itself — which doesn't mean you misrepresent the point of view; it only means you present the idea so that it is so attractive the other person wants to open it.

Suggestion #5: Hang Tough.

Better ideas are worth bringing forward again and again and again. Find the moments when it is best to do so and search for those individuals who are giving you air time. You'll know who they are: they start by asking questions and want to know about implications. Some may appear to be arguing with you but all they are doing is making sure the idea is strong and is capable of withstanding tests.

Suggestion #6: Build Alliances.

Identify others who have similar or kindred ideas that have already been bought or accepted. Your's blended with their's may make your's seem not so foolish or far-fetched. Better yet, find someone who has a need or desire to be seen on the cutting edge and who has a reputation for making unconventional ideas work. Let them be the sponsor or the person who gives life to your point of view. I have found that these are often experienced individuals at packaging; they know how to capture imaginations, connect ideas to needs, and make what appears to be odd seem ordinary.

Suggestion # 7: Avoid Gloating.

When your idea is finally bought and embraced by others — as often is the case — avoid saying I-told-you-so, recounting how difficult it was to get them on side, or berating them for not being on board earlier: that behaviour is as graceless as taunting in sports or gloating in politics.

Instead, proceed as if there was no struggle, no to and fro, no labels, no ridicule. Welcome others to build on the idea, to change it, and to make the idea better.

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