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Winning through Adversity: Steps to Survival in a Harsher World

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In the post-Enron, post Internet bubble economy, it is not enough to do well. Small failures are punished by large falls in share price. Capital is far tougher to find and comes with more strings attached. Everyone faces a more skeptical public and press. Business investment remains torpid, so managers have to make do with less and still provide expected results. The mantra is "better results from fewer people, less resources and lower costs."

In such a harsh environment, survival depends on finding some sustainable source of competitive advantage. Following the herd will never produce a lead over others. That's the thing about herds. Everyone goes along together. Amongst so many, maybe the other guy will be the one to get eaten this time. Animals do it to find safety in numbers against lurking predators. Organizations do it to avoid being singled out for criticism.

There used to be a saying that no one ever got fired for buying IBM. Trouble is, people get fired today simply for being there in greater numbers than top management feels it can afford. Playing safe means never breaking away from the pack, but the pack is where all the mediocre, barely surviving companies will be found.

Taking the conventional line is extremely risky in this business climate. Managers and organizations who get ahead have always broken with convention. They set what is usually called "industry best practice," and by the time everyone else gets around to copying it, these true leaders are already doing something else. There is no advantage from playing "catch up." The more we seek to avoid the supposedly high risk game of taking the lead, the more likely we are to find ourselves lumped in with everyone else: the "cannon fodder" who are the most easily expendable when times become critical.

Is there a way to use adversity itself to build a solid base for achievement, regardless of upturns or downturns? Is it possible to minimize risk without limiting achievement by sticking with the mediocre majority? It is indeed. This paper will show you how it works.

Understanding how it truly is
When we are faced with a problem, most of us immediately begin to focus on the symptoms. They define what the problem looks like, where it produces discomfort and why we have tackled it in the first place. Get rid of the symptoms and the problem will be eliminated.

Wrong. Those symptoms are our friends. Like the pain from a cut or a bruise, they alert us to trouble and point us to where it may be. If we take the corporate equivalent of painkillers to suppress our discomfort, we may allow things to drift along until what was a common cold turns into pneumonia with complications.

What we need is a real appreciation of the causes that produce any symptoms. Reaching at once for an off-the-shelf solution (say from industry best practice) is a recipe for confusion, frustration and failure. However good in itself, it may have little or no relation to the underlying issues that caused our problem and will go on sustaining it.

Those who dare to improvise, win

Most of life is a process of adaptation and improvisation: doing the best we can and managing to cope, despite lacking the resources, knowledge, skills or preparation we would have chosen, had we only known what we would have to face.

Over the millennia, the human species has been shaped by the need to cope with the unexpected. From the cave man trying to survive in a world with predators well known for egregious greed (saber-toothed tigers, wolves and bears), to sixteenth century navigators sailing toward the edge of the known world and astronauts facing certain death in Apollo 13, improvisation has been the very stuff of survival. It is the seed bed of individual and organizational potential. Without it, we repeat ourselves. No learning takes place and every problem has to be tackled with off-the-shelf answers, however approximate. Without improvisation, no one would display truly surprising talents - astonishing themselves as much as others.

Adaptability, innovation and improvisation sum up potential: that capacity and determination to face unexpected, potentially catastrophic challenges and overcome them. Those who emerge as true leaders are always proactive, reaching forward to cope with life's uncertainties, instead of trying to ignore or run away from them.

Improvisation is often the first casualty in times of risk and hardship. People and organizations play it safe. It feels risky to stick your neck out and try something new, even if current approaches are failing on every side. In reality, the riskiest option is sticking with what you know. The symptoms of the problem are telling you that something different is needed. Suppressing them changes nothing.

If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly. In the real world, doing something new almost always means doing it poorly the first time. Improvising never produces a polished result. Sir Winston Churchill wrote, "Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm."

The way to get out the herd and let adversity itself turn you into the next big success is to practice "Conscious Incompetence."

Practicing "Conscious Incompetence"

What is it like when you do something you have not done before? You do a pretty poor job. You do it badly. There is no other way to learn. If you are only willing to do things well, you cannot improvise or do anything new. To develop your potential you must start to cultivate a new skill: the skill of "Conscious Incompetence."

In the world of work, there is so much pressure for doing things correctly from the start that most people live in a constant state of anxiety. If we are not allowed a period of grace to learn by doing things badly, we had better stick to what we know we can do. If we are to "hit the ground running" in a business that has "no room for passengers," we must either do everything competently from the start or risk being pushed aside.

The result of such needless torment is that people draw back from new areas. They have survived to the point of doing something – anything – capably, so they do not want to risk themselves by stepping outside this hard-won comfort zone.

"Conscious Incompetence" should be required behavior in every organization. This is true for individuals, teams and the

whole corporation. The world makes unavoidable and unexpected demands on us. Such demands force us along new paths, if we want to avoid the fate of the dinosaurs. Improvising is a perfectly natural human activity, but only making it deliberate will allow us to use it effectively, whenever and wherever and however we want.

“Conscious Incompetence” – seeing what might work and doing it, even if we do it badly at first – requires four steps:

Step 1: Ask yourself, “Is this truly what I think it is?”

It is easy to be misled by appearances or the opinions of others. Those who advised major corporations to indulge in creative accounting were simply giving opinions. Were their opinions correct? Events have proven they were not. What appears to be the case maybe a delusion. It is always better to take a clear look and start by asking whether it truly exists in the form that is being presented to you.

This sounds very simple, but it is amazing how often managers leap into action without verifying the existence of a problem. If what you are being told is not correct, you may easily take action that creates a problem where none existed.

Go behind the symptoms. Distinguish causes from their effects. Explore, poke, probe and question. Don’t worry what others think. What passes for thinking most of the time within organizations is merely the rearrangement of old habits and preset opinions. As the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote, “Few people think more than two or three times a year. I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.” (Shaw was

neither troubled by modesty nor inhibited in his comments on others.)

If you find that what you are being told is untrue, you are saved from pointless action. If it seems to be correct, test it further.

Step 2: Then ask yourself, “What tells me that this is true?”

You need to be clear about exactly what is going on. If someone tells you, “we have a retention problem,” take the time to ask whether that is true; and if you think it may be, take the next step and explore what you can see, hear or experience that actually tells you the problem exists.

Confusion is the enemy of effective judgment. Perhaps a problem does exist, but if you are confused about its nature and extent, there is little chance that you can take correct decisions on what to do about it.

Make a list of the “proofs” that demonstrate the problem. You will need this for the next step.

The fear that is generated in harsh times makes us hurry to premature action. If we believe we need to do something immediately, we have little option except to reach for the conventional solution. Yet most of our requirement for immediate action comes from anxiety, not reality. Few things that occur in organizations demand instant responses. Even half an hour of focused thought can prevent disaster and a major loss of face.

Step 3: Ask “why?” Do that repeatedly until you have isolated the real causes of any problem.

“Why?” is the most useful single question in the universe. Perhaps that is why toddlers use it so often. They have not yet been taught that it is not polite. They also need to learn a whole lot in a hurry and know,

instinctively, that asking “why?” all the time is the best way to do it. Most parents find their child’s persistence in asking “why?” soon becomes maddening. Most bosses feel exactly the same way about their subordinates. Both groups are wrong. Asking “why?” can be uncomfortable, but it is nearly always productive.

An example will show how this process works and what makes it so useful.

Suppose I have been presented with the problem of someone in my team whose performance is becoming poorer and poorer. Is this opinion correct? I believe it is. I have direct experience of the problems it causes.

What tells me that I am correct in seeing a performance problem? For a start, the person’s work results are way below what is acceptable. Then he or she is often late for work, or I notice periods of wandering around for no purpose, or long periods gossiping around the water cooler. Finally, I have received complaints from the rest of the team that this person is not pulling their weight. There may be more, but these will do for a start.

I list each one and start asking “Why?” **Why** are the person’s results so poor? He or she seems to be lazy and lacks competence. I stop myself from rushing to propose some kind of skill or competence training. It’s still too early to reach conclusions. **Why** the laziness and lack of competence? Poor motivation. Even the skills I know he or she possesses are not used properly. **Why** is motivation poor? The team member was passed over for promotion; or is disaffected in some way; or would really like to do different work, but is hanging on to this job for fear of resigning and not finding anything else. Maybe there is a problem with team culture? Our poor performer has values that are openly at odds with everyone else’s.

Whatever I discover, I know now what is causing this part of the performance problem, so I can look for an answer that is well-fitted to deal with it. I can deal with the other proofs in the same way. **Why** the problems of wasting time and being late? Maybe motivation again. **Why** does the rest of team complain to me? Because they like this person and don’t want to take on the issue themselves. I get to be Mr. Nasty. In addition to the performance issues, I have now uncovered an issue around the team taking responsibility for their own relationships.

Step 4: Assume permission to improvise, even if you get it wrong first time.

Suppose Brad is afraid of anything that might suggest incompetence or failure. Many high performers are. They are almost superstitious about the possibility of failure, often because they have never experienced it themselves. Brad is faced with an important decision. He does not want to make a mistake, or take risks he can avoid. The best way to meet both these objectives looks to be to use his knowledge and memory to see how this kind of decision has been made before, then replicate it.

Brad looks for this information in the past. He remembers what he has done that turned out well; recalls what he learned at business school and corporate training events; searches out industry best practice. He finds things he already knows, and uses this knowledge to make a decision that has the best chances of being correct in terms of past knowledge. That is why he will probably never develop more than a fraction of his potential.

Susan comes up against the same decision, but decides it is a great chance for stealthily practicing “Conscious Incompetence.” It is

best done in secret. The rest of the world tends to misunderstand.

Susan adds the magic ingredient that is going to transform her career. She takes time to review all the other options she can think up that do not match industry best practice, and are not in line with how things have been done before. She knows that she is not likely to be good at them, but checks them out just the same. By doing this, she has started learning something new, not just learning more about what she already knows.

When Susan starts to implement her idea, she makes many mistakes – she knew she had little previous competence to help her – but each one teaches her more. She persists in the face of failure. By the end of the project, Susan has accessed more of her potential, the company has gained a new approach, and senior management has recognized a talent in the making. Brad is still polishing his existing knowledge and wonders why his career is not progressing.

“Conscious Incompetence” and deliberate improvisation should be required behavior in every organization. It is the only way for organizations, and the people in them, to access untapped potential and put it to use. In today’s harsh business environment, the real risks come from standing still and believing we already know all the answers.

In truth, the conventional way to structure and manage organizations seems to be broken, perhaps beyond repair. If received wisdom was working, we wouldn’t be in this mess. It’s high time we stopped banging our heads against the same old wall and tried something new.

About the Author

Adrian Savage is president of PNA, Inc., which provides solutions that enable corporations to manage succession management, employee retention and talent utilization. He is the author of “A Spark from Heaven?” a radical new look at the nature and development of potential in organizations, teams and individuals. Author and management guru Beverley Kaye says the book is “...a must read for senior leaders and HR professionals who want to understand and send a message about the importance of having a potential-friendly culture...” Using proprietary approaches that have been developed and proven over more than 15 years, PNA helps national and international clients maximize individual, team and organizational strengths to achieve their business goals. PNA is part of the global RSM International network.

About Work In Progress Coaching

Founded by Camille Smith, Work In Progress Coaching specializes in increasing the performance and productivity of executives, managers and teams. Her approach enables people to achieve organizational goals while maximizing personal and corporate resources. “When people access their potential and produce results that they thought were impossible, two powerful things happen: the bottom line benefits *and* people’s view of what they can do is expanded. This gives the individual and the organization the ability to create and fulfill rewarding futures.”

As an associate of PNA, Inc., Camille is a certified NetTPS™ Solutions Provider. For more information, call 831-685-1480 or visit www.wipcoaching.com.