

THERE IS A TIDE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN



Understanding the human dimension is what sets apart great companies from good ones. A helpful way to elucidate intangible performance variables.

Good companies have good fundamentals. They are characterized by clear goals, accessible information, crisp decision-making, robust follow-through, straightforward plans, capable people, aligned rewards, and strong customer focus. Every leadership book speaks to the necessity of these capabilities; business educators teach the underlying principles; magazines publish stories illuminating real-world experiences; Wall Street analysts use these fundamentals to evaluate performance; and mentors teach them to their protégés.

But what is it that distinguishes the great companies from those that are merely good? You know the firms I mean -- the ones that Jerry Collins writes about in his new book, *Good to Great*, or the ones that always top the "Best Company" lists compiled by Fortune and other magazines. These are the handful of top performing companies that turn in outstanding results year, after year, after year.

They all do the tangible business stuff well, but what mark them as great are their intangibles. Their leaders know that the human dimension is the performance edge that makes them outstanding. Remember Jack Welch's annual report letter a few years ago pointing to these variables?

The problem is that the "soft stuff" can be ethereal to enumerate and elusive to explain. In certain respects the human side of business is like the ocean's current. It is always present; the tides affect everything in the sea. It is a hidden energy source; its power is concealed from the farm boy who first looks upon the sea. And it either helps or hinders a vessel's progress; no one can stop its influence.

Not too long ago, our company's leadership team was invited to participate in a sailing race for 40 or so boats at the San Diego Yacht Club, the Mecca for sailors as the Club is home to four Olympic Gold Medal sailors. The race was a "pursuit" where the fastest boat started last. Our host, a client CEO, is a big-time racer, who happened to have the largest boat in the race, a J160. So, we began nearly 20 minutes behind the first starting gun.

We were doing great until the last leg, a beat up the sound to the finish line. About halfway there we tacked towards mid-channel to get better wind, while the three or four boats in front of us hugged the shoreline. You can probably guess what happened. After struggling to close the distance, and failing, we passed a buoy and saw that we were fighting a two-knot current. This error cost us the race.

We finished about a minute behind the winner. As we motored towards the dock, he called over to let us know that "even a fish knows better than to swim upstream."

Our fundamentals were solid, a new boat, an experienced captain, wonderful sails, and a hard-working crew. But what we overlooked was the hidden element. The performance penalty was just great enough to negate the other factors we had going for us.

The analogy of the ocean's current to the human dimension in business is a helpful way to elucidate performance intangibles. Three stand out: Thought, Consciousness, and Mind:

Like the tides, our thoughts are always flowing. We can no more stop our thinking than we can cause the ocean's current to halt. Sometimes our thinking rushes along like a fast flowing surge; at other times our thoughts meander slowly like the tide when it is close to turning.

Perhaps you have experienced moments when your thinking seems to stop, when you can glimpse the space between thoughts. This is like the pause when the tide turns from ebb to flood, and all current ceases. Easterners would say that the goal of meditation is to experience this state of "no mind."

We experience thoughts through our consciousness expressed as feelings. It is our feelings that give us the clues to the state of our thought processes. This is analogous to understanding the strength and direction of the tide by watching currents as they flow around objects or listening to the surf as it breaks upon ledges and shoals.

Generations ago, Maine sailors, who often had to cope with thick fogs, learned to use tidal effects to help them navigate. In the same way, people can use their awareness of feelings to understand their state of mind. Tranquil feelings are suggestive of a calm thought process, just as unruffled water points to gentle currents. Stressful, angry, preoccupied, or fast-paced feelings are signs that one's thoughts, like a rapidly flowing tidal current, are creating turbulence and pushing the boat off course.

Just as gravity powers the ocean's tides, the Mind generates thought. Did you ever stop to wonder where your thoughts come from? I am not speaking about searching for a memory or trying to recall a specific bit of knowledge. What I am pointing to are those flashes of insight or inspiration that appear out of nowhere. They simply come to mind. Some would call them original thought. Socrates said all knowledge is merely remembering what is already there, the universal or spiritual

intelligence that exists in every human being.

The Mind is about as well understood as gravity. Scientists can describe gravity's effects, what it does to physical objects, but cannot tell us how it actually works, just as physicians can describe the brain's physical structures but cannot tell us how thought is produced.

The reason is simple, the Mind exists at a more fundamental level than our intellect, so our intelligence can never fully understand it. All we can do is accept that it impacts our psychological happiness just as gravity affects on our physical welfare.

Once I grasped these three concepts, that my reality is created by my own thoughts, that I experience thought via consciousness, and that the Mind is the energy source of all living things, I began to notice their relevance everywhere in my business life.

First of all, I began to see that my own state of mind mattered. When I was feeling relaxed, secure, and confident, work, was easy and effortless. When I was tired, stressed, or anxious, a simple phone call loomed large. But as I began to value the feelings associated with a calm thinking process, I changed. I got more sleep, scheduled my days less intensively, and took more frequent breaks. Surprisingly, my productivity increased and my pleasure from work deepened.

Next, I came to realize that I had the power to choose. It was up to me whether or not I acted on any particular thought. Like sailors tacking their boats away from turbulent waters, I learned that if I was having a bad day or was in a low mood, in other words fighting the currents, I did not have to make it worse by paying undue attention to anxious, busy, or worried thoughts.

This does not mean that I am never affected by negative thinking, quite the contrary. Worried, arrogant, or angry thoughts can still pop into my head. But what I now see is that I don't have to react to them mindlessly. I can choose to postpone action until my thinking is more relaxed and lighthearted. I can be like the skipper who waits until the tide is favorable before weighing anchor.

In business meetings I began to notice that the tone of the participants was an important variable in our collective performance. Meetings could be graceful and easy allowing the group to tackle the thorniest problems, or the room could feel tense and tight making resolution of even the simplest question pure drudgery.

Recognizing the importance of a positive tone, I took care to start meetings only when feelings were upbeat. Simple things, like helping people connect with one another before the session started or making sure that my own thoughts were free and clear, seemed to improve the tenor and make meetings more productive and enjoyable. And when the tenor was poor, I learned that calling a break could change the mood, as people mentally relaxed and found their bearings. In other words, I learned to go with a following current rather than plow ahead mindlessly into an oncoming tide.

Listening also took on a new meaning. Before, I realized that everyone creates his or her reality through their thinking; I tended to have a very black-or-white view of things. Either I was right or the other person wrong (well, maybe in rare circumstances I might have misunderstood the "facts"). Now I saw that people's thoughts determine their reality (the old argument of the glass being half full or half empty). What became most interesting was not being right (or avoiding being wrong) but allowing myself to be struck by my insights as I listened to others talk about what looks real to them.

I am often amazed by what people say, and I now understand that they are much more willing to share their thoughts because I no longer project judgmental feelings. In place of being a "know-it-all," I now experience conversation as bringing a wonderfully fresh perspective and the blossoming of new learning that helps me do a better job. This is so much more valuable than winning the debate about stuff I already 'know I know.'

Most importantly, I now know that whenever I approach others with feelings of warmth, kindness, compassion, or love, my own thoughts are kept free of negativity, worry, busyness, or anger. In other words, I stop paying attention to the selfish needs of my own ego and start paying attention to being connected to others.

When these feelings are present, I find that not only am I able to access my own wisdom and common sense fearlessly but also that the people around me are capable of doing the same thing. What we gain is the tangible power of collaborative common sense, with everyone's innate intelligence being applied to the business challenge irrespective of rank, title, or experience.

Just as captains strive to set sail in seaworthy vessels and to know the ocean as well as they know themselves, so leaders must ensure that their organizations have sound fundamentals and must learn to appreciate their people by knowing themselves. Great accomplishments demand that everyone does his or her best. Greatness is achieved only when people look within to understand the power of Thought, Consciousness, and Mind.

There is a Tide in the affairs of Men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

Julius Caesar
By William Shakespeare

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