

20/20 HINDSIGHT



Looking back, a leader can easily point to what created “a great ride.” But going forward into change, rely on insights that point to three key questions.

Whenever a leader takes the time to look back, the journey seems so obvious; yet the path ahead never appears as clear. That is why it's useful for leaders to reflect upon their organization's accomplishments and learn from the understanding this process generates.

Recently an email crossed my desk and inspired me to pause to reflect in order to see what self-evident lessons came to mind. The Founder of a company that had agreed to be acquired by a much larger firm wrote the email to acknowledge the journey the organization had been taking. His words are quoted here:

"What a great ride!

“Fate brought us together; what matters kept us together; our dreams came to life; and, our purpose became one.

“Hasn't our Firm profoundly touched us all? Who among us has not found their own wisdom and common sense? Who among us has not learned what it means to lead by speaking in one's own voice? Who among us has not seen the power of teamwork brought to life by love and respect? Who among us has not felt the gratitude of serving clients? Who among us has not seen the inspiration that comes from looking to the unknown? Who among us has not experienced the joy of creating something fresh from the power of one's own insight? Who among us has not found their work easy and graceful as quietude and simplicity prevail?

“Nothing is permanent, but impermanence. Let us treasure our memories by using what we learned in work and play. Let us rejoice in today's opportunities by attending to what is happening now, knowing this energizes the spirit that lies within.

“We will be connected through our experiences and friendships. Our journey will be as it always has been -- creating our lives in the moment, placing our talents in the service of others, and living in grace. Health is our good fortune; contentment is our greatest wealth.

“On behalf of every firm member and with deep appreciation and gratitude to all, farewell.”

This is a heartfelt note that speaks clearly to every person in that firm. But what understanding about leadership might the Founder have gained that he was able to compress such authenticity into so few words?

Foremost is his appreciation that the ultimate measure of a leader's success is the extent to which those led grow in their own capacity to lead, to express their own talents, and to extend their own capabilities as they dare to undertake new challenges. The paragraph calling for responses to the questions, "Who among us" points to the personal growth that must have happened in this company,

Of course, creating the conditions where *everyone* is assumed to be on the "fast track" requires a huge shift in the leader's perspective. He or she must re-orient their thinking – from being primarily concerned about their own contribution to being predominately focused on the personal contribution and growth that comes through collective accomplishment. In other words, learning and development happen most quickly when the leader looks towards what is not known, rather than what is already understood.

Since accountability cannot be delegated, it takes a leap of faith to trust that others not only have the capacity to step up, but also have the commitment to make whatever contribution is required. Most often, this becomes crystal clear when the leader is delegating decision-making responsibility. At that moment his inner voice says, "Wait just a minute! You mean they are going to make the decisions, but I have to live with the consequences?" The leader needs to trust that these actions will work out even though he or she cannot prove it. Through experience, we gain confidence that people will rise to the occasion when given the chance.

Effective delegation releases more constructive energy than anything else a leader can do. This is true because the effort of any one person, no matter how talented, is dwarfed by the contributions of many. This is so obvious that it needs no proof; but it does require hope, hope in the sense of being willing to acknowledge that possibilities exist beyond our personal knowledge or experience. When leaders are hopeful, they release the creativity and contributions of others, who step forward with what is needed because they can see what needs doing more clearly than the leaders.

But when a leader is only paying lip service to delegation, people are quick to see that the deeds don't match the words; they stop trying and wait for the leader to call the shots. You've probably heard the phrase, "The bottleneck is at the head of the bottle." Unfortunately, this condition tends to be the rule rather than the exception.

Context may be the second most important message in this e-mail. Organizations exist to accomplish work that is larger than what a mere handful of people can do, much less a single individual. The very first lines of the e-mail acknowledge the unifying and binding qualities of getting context right.

Harnessing that energy is less telling people what to do and more helping them tap their passion, understand their purpose, and find their place. This is best accomplished by clarifying context through an ongoing conversation about what matters; what is possible, given what matters; what needs to be accomplished, given what is possible; and how one contributes, given what needs to be accomplished.

These are simple questions, really, but ones that leaders too often take for granted by leaving them to the imagination. The net result is that people suit up to play basketball, only to find that the court is actually an ice rink and the game hockey.

Where the leader exhorts the troops by telling them the answers to these questions, we most often see feelings of confusion ("I heard the words but did not understand the meaning"), compliance ("While I don't agree with what you are telling me, I will go along with it"), or coercion ("If you pay me enough, I'll do what you ask").

Where the leader takes the tack of "selling" his organization, we often find passive resistance ("I didn't want to buy the darn thing anyway"), obstinacy ("You'll have to prove what's in it for me"), or apprehension ("Holy cow! That is a really big idea, and I don't see how we will ever be able to do it").

So while an ongoing dialogue about these contextual questions may seem repetitive, in reality the leader needs to view such a dialogue as an opportunity for everyone to internalize the principles that will guide their everyday actions and decisions. The organization then becomes "self-correcting" in that leaders, peers, and subordinates stand on common ground and, thereby, have the understanding to keep things on track. And the leader sees what is missing so that he or she can fill in the gaps.

Finally, in his e-mail the Founder is pointing to the value of living one's life in the moment by paying attention to what is happening now and doing so with feelings of contentment, grace, and service. Implicitly, he is recognizing the freshness and responsiveness of creating life in the moment by having quiet and calm thoughts.

So often we clutter our minds with the distractions of yesterday's events or with worries about what might happen tomorrow. Then, too, we sometimes rush into things and become so busy doing stuff that we lose perspective and make our work tiresome and wearing instead of easy and graceful. And whenever we become concerned primarily about how we look to others, we cannot see, much less serve, their needs.

Of course, we are all bound to obsess about yesterday, worry about the future, or lose our bearings from time to time; that comes with being human. But it is a wise leader who understands that thoughts come and go, and that we have the capacity to turn our backs on thinking that prevents us from being fully present in the moment.

Embedded in the Founder's e-mail is the understanding that our feelings are the guide to the quality of our thought processes. Grace, compassion, warmth, happiness, and contentment are the signs that all is right with the world and that we will be able to take on the challenges and possibilities that each day promises.

So if you are interested in a "great ride," take a moment to reflect on these questions:

- What are you doing to help yourself and others who work with you to reach your/their potential?
- Would you and the people you work with say the context is clear, or is the purpose fuzzy?
- Are you and others feeling contented and connected right now so that your/their thinking is clear and fully in the moment?

We all have been issued just one ticket for our journey through life. Why not make the most of it by stepping up and going for it, at work and at play, the same way the firm referred to in the email seemingly does?

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