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Advocating for inquiry in the workplace

Mark Federman grins, leans back in his chair and starts to speak. “Best practice is the worst practice. To get an edge, you need to think differently. Ignore what you notice and notice what you ignore”.

It’s typical of Federman, part riddle, part paradox, part solid business advice. Zen koans for managers come easily to Federman, the Chief Strategist of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto.

But perhaps thinking differently isn’t as easy as Federman would suggest. In the dominant culture that pervades our organizations, thinking outside of the proverbial box requires that we first step outside of the box we’re often put in. But before that, we need to recognize that it is we who build the very boxes in which we are contained. It requires we suspend our assumptions on what we think we know and explore possibilities other than those we hold as our own self-evident “truths”.

MIT’s Peter Senge puts it this way: we need to move away from advocacy – the tendency in North American business to argue our own positions – and toward inquiry – a dialogue in which we jointly explore the meanings we share with others on our surroundings.

Is this simply another managerial fad, a saccharine-laced nod to the zeitgeist of consensus, group-harmony and empowerment?

Perhaps not. Perhaps it goes to the core of what is a burning-platform to many organizations: innovation and ultimately, survival.

In a Harvard Business Review article titled Why Good Companies Go Bad, Donald Sull argues as much. According to Sull, when the tectonics of an industry shift, established players – the winners – typically respond quickly, belying accusations of complacency, paralysis and arrogance. The problem is, their actions are most often rooted in the mental models that laid the foundation for their past successes. Invariably, the organizational default setting which was hard-wired into the organization when it was a winner in the past, don’t apply to the new reality. This is when companies – winners – get into trouble.

To paraphrase Federman, companies look backward into the future.

Says Federman, “the language we use is counter-productive to dealing with complex environmental landscapes. We tend (toward) dichotomies as a way of looking at complex things”.

Federman says that in such ways, we begin to build absolutes – pros and cons; strengths and weaknesses; right and wrong; best practices and worst practices. We should be exploring the terrain through dialogue instead of advocating concrete positions which can turn into intellectual dead-ends.

What drives this dynamic? He proposes the root goes to our earliest experiences in school where the job of the student is to find the “right” answer. As we enter the work world, we begin to politicize “right” answers. In short, we build reward systems that encourage advocacy over inquiry and this drives our interaction with those around us.

Gareth Morgan disagrees.

Morgan, Distinguished Research Professor at York University’s Schulich School of Business, is as cautious and reserved a speaker as Federman is effusive. Indeed, Morgan hesitated when asked for an interview, claiming not to be current on the most recent literature on the way people in organizations communicate. In an age when self-promotion is all but expected, it’s an unexpected modesty from a man whose literature on organizations is used as a core text at over 500 universities and management programs around the world.

Morgan is careful to explain, “in many organizations people are so busy they don’t have the time to communicate effectively despite the information technology that is available. So much is done on the fly that things fall between the cracks. So despite the best intentions, communication isn’t what it ought to be. I don’t think you can say that in terms of intrinsic culture there is an adversarial bias”.

Jo Nelson agrees with Morgan that time pressures in our organizations play a significant role in forming the way we communicate. As a Principal of ICA Associates, a not-for-profit dedicated to teaching and promoting the art of facilitation, Nelson works with organizations to resolve conflict and promote dialogue.

“It is an assumption that inquiry takes more time”, says Nelson. “With the proper tools, it actually takes less time. (And) you get better results”.

The goal, according to Nelson, is to gather the wisdom that resides in all levels of the organization and integrate it into strategies and approaches which align people quickly.

But rather than promoting consensus and total democratization of the work-place as a goal in and of itself, to Nelson, the art lies in understanding just what the effective levels of involvement for people are. Organizations need to involve people in dialogue and

decision making – co-creating outcomes according to Nelson – only as far as it makes sense.

Simply put, there will be times when workers need to be recipients of information and instruction and other times when they must have full input into, and responsibility for, outcomes.

In other words, much of what we do, how we manage, how we see the world and how we communicate is interpretive.

This, according to Morgan, is where traditionally educated managers – those who attend our business schools for MBA's – can get into trouble.

At a time when no less a management sage than Henry Mintzberg proposes that business schools create analysts and not managers, Morgan weighs in by saying, “traditionally, business schools have done a terrible job (at creating managers) but they're doing a lot better”. He cites innovative work being done at Schulich to teach leadership, holistic thinking and decision making skills to new students in their first weeks in the school's MBA program.

According to Morgan, the tendency at business schools to seek applicants with high standardized test scores, creates a bias toward the analytical, those who can crunch the numbers. But Morgan says “the leadership roles of today are interpretive they require vision, creation and challenge. We need to be able to communicate”.

Communication, according to Morgan, is only one element of management, which, by its nature, is an interpretive art. “In order to communicate, you need to interpret what's going on”.

Ask Mark Federman and he would propose that interpretation first requires exploration.

“McLuhan said, ‘I'm an explorer, not an explainer’”, says Federman.

Indeed, at a time when companies pay big money for leaders to “know” the answers, Federman proposes it is actually a sign of good leadership to lead expeditions. The problem is, investigation is often interpreted as a sign of weakness and indecision. It is not seen as good leadership to be contemplative. We prefer our leaders to be decisive.

“Our heroes in the past were explorers”, says Federman. “Columbus screwed up He said ‘hey, I found India’, but it was west India. And he was still a hero”. Within, he says, lies a lesson. “You may find what you're looking for, but you may find something surprising that is even more valuable”.

So, if it is true that companies look backward into the future, thereby handcuffing themselves to outdated understandings that don't apply to new realities, what are companies to do?

Morgan proposes organizations adopt broad-based recruitment strategies in order to recruit a variety of people with different innate abilities. In such a way, intellectual diversity and diversity of viewpoint can be developed. This goes to the heart of efforts at Schulich to teach students to adopt the roles of different stakeholders when making decisions, thereby adopting different perspectives.

Jo Nelson suggests companies begin delving into the increasingly sophisticated techniques and body of knowledge surrounding facilitation of dialogue and participative decision making. As the pace of business accelerates, Nelson proposes that the alignment of people by including them in our planning processes actually accelerates an organization's agility and ability to respond.

Mark Federman proposes leaders embrace ignorance, or literally "ignore-ance", the ability to selectively ignore that which is irrelevant or merely distracting.

To Federman, within "ignore-ance" lies the ability to inquire by suspending our assumptions and developing the ability to become childlike in our thinking, ignoring what we think we have been conditioned to see. "It may be said that the most valuable personal skill for an effective manager is ignorance", says Federman.

He continues, "in this sense, ignorance is not bliss. It is the practical manifestation of acute awareness and heightened perception".

The problem, according to Federman, is our thinking is constrained by what our mental models allow us to see, and this is the origin of the proverbial box. After all, "if I didn't believe it, I wouldn't have seen it".

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Sidebar

Want to develop your ability to inquire? Here's five thoughts:

- Build diversity into your team. Don't hire that hot, young MBA. Hire that hot, young cultural anthropologist.
- Encourage your people to tell you the bad news. After all, you know you're going to hear the good news.
- Evaluate your businesses and products every three years. If you weren't in a business you currently are in, would you be dedicating scarce resources to entering it today?
- Consider: what are your non-customers saying? According to Peter Drucker, companies are too focused on their customers. They should be paying more attention to their non-customers. Wal-Mart is massive. It is one of the most successful businesses in the world. Yet, only 14% of Americans regularly shop there. What are the other 84% doing?
- Hire a facilitator. Too often, we "wing" it when it comes to planning, brainstorming and strategy development. Outside professionals have skills we don't have and hear things we don't hear. They hold the essence of our conversations and keep us focused.