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Teetering on the Edge ... or Adopting a Leap of Faith Approach?

By Kathleen M. Peterson
Chief Vision Officer, PowerHouse Consulting, Inc.

“Teeter” is defined in the dictionary as “to alternate, as between opposing attitudes or positions; vacillate.” Does this definition remind you of anything? It does me. I am reminded of all the times managers teeter on the edge of making decisions ... as opposed to others that adopt willingly a “leap of faith” strategy. In my experience, “teetering” slows progress, dilutes passion, delays improvements, causes anxiety, and makes leaders look bad.

“Leap of faith” is defined in www.businessdictionary.com as “in business or finance to express a decision to act based on available information or analysis and where the outcome is uncertain.” Those that take a “leap of faith” approach may appear irresponsible to those who prefer to teeter, but I feel that these folks are better equipped to operate in today’s business environment. In order to adopt a leap of faith approach, one must be skilled at evaluating due diligence requirements upon which decisions can be made and achieving a stronger sense of outcome. They see the bigger picture better than those who teeter. Generally speaking, I also see these folks as the personification of healthy curiosity. These folks are armed with targeted questions about where they need to be and laser-like ability to utilize available information or analysis to move forward on initiatives.

Leap of faith leadership requires many things ... a capability for learning, nearly unquenchable curiosity; ability to evaluate situations in terms of honest business outcomes; and an innate ability to consider how impending decisions will impact revenue, margins, efficiency, the Customer Experience, Contact Center staff and cross-functional partners. This ability is based on knowing enough as a leader to swiftly assimilate not only the initiative being evaluated or planned, but also the strategic, operational, and change management requirements. As a contrast, “teeterers” tend to lengthen decision making cycles based on fear of doing something “wrong.” The indication being leaning from past experiences has been assimilated as fear rather than valuable learning.

A business leader’s worst possible business approach is to have a deeply hidden agenda of fear. Sadly, most folks I observe in this situation rampant deny that this is the case. They defend enthusiastically a delay in decision-making as the worthy act of doing due diligence. It appears that “teeterers” also engage in a process known as “consensus building.” This typically means inviting random people that are able only to contribute their “opinion” and have little if any expertise relevant to the initiative under discussion.

It is a reasonable staff development action to include those that have been identified as potential future leaders. But why doesn’t anyone tell them to simply listen ... that in fact they have not been invited to “participate” but to “observe” as a learning exercise? These folks should be free to ask questions or offer information at appropriate points in the process, but not to weigh in on something about which they have not yet gained any applicable knowledge or expertise. This slows things to a halt, with discussion beginning to include all manner of irrelevancy. The potential exists for accumulating mountains of unnecessary
RANTS & RAVES!
Randomly Timed Musings

information, analyzing processes, and arguing ideologies to the point of absurdity. (I have seen departments lose funding or more senior leaders swooping in to take over the reins of decision-making.)

For example, I have witnessed IT staff weighing in philosophically on Contact Center performance metrics, work-at-home agents, outsource partner selection and all manner of other topics they know little about. Yet time is allocated, thoughts entertained, and credence is given … just because they were invited to the table. IT staff provide invaluable expertise related to the impact of technology and requirements of a particular initiative; they don’t need to weigh in its strategic value. (I don’t mean to pick on IT, just simply to provide a realistic example.)

Those with a “leap of faith” leadership profile nurture the development of risk tolerance through learning by experience. There is an understanding of how much information and documentation is really necessary to mitigate decision-making risks. Leap of faith leaders are ready to be accountable, take responsibility, and abort if and when it becomes apparent that the initiative or solution is not well founded. Those willing to fail make ten times the number of decisions than those that teeter.

Where are you? Are you teetering on the edge? Or are you learning and building your experience to yield a level of expertise that will set you upon the path to make decisions that sometimes include a simple “leap of faith.” The Contact Center is fast becoming a strategic asset, especially when led by those that focus on what one “needs to know” rather than one “needing to know everything.”

No matter the duration of the due diligence exercise, there is no guarantee that anything you do will actually yield the desired outcome. To be considered a strategic asset, enjoy the respect and trust of senior leaders, and receive associated budget allocations, you must be willing to embrace constant learning as the tool to mitigating the fear of failure. Let’s face it … if you are not “good” at being seen as a strategic asset, it is highly unlikely that you will gain access to the budget dollars that ultimately determine your department’s corporate worth.

We’re forever teetering on the brink of the unknowable, and trying to understand what can’t be understood. Isaac Asimov, 20th Century Scientist

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