

Does excellence still have an opportunity to shine?

Growing up in our house, we were regularly told to rise to the occasion. Even more often, people were held up to us as examples of those who could rise to the occasion.

Repetition drilled into my brain that people who rose to the occasion were those possessed of copious amounts of generosity, courage and adaptability that allowed them to deal with imperfection, surprise and failure without hesitation. These were leaders who managed life as it happened, rather than as it was supposed to be.

I guess the idea was, that, as children, we would learn to be bigger than whatever surprise or wild-card hand life dealt us.

In the larger world, this capability surely saves a great deal of time and money. Individuals able to make a workable plan that factors in unexpected circumstance, are not bogged down with what might have been but rather move forward positively with what is.

Rising to the occasion calls for an especially flexible mind set, able to pit the known against the unknown... on-the-fly strategizing that marries structure and formula with chaos and crisis.

Has the prevalent perception of attainable certainty precluded the need for this specific contribution in our time? For me the problem is threefold:

- Firstly, lazy minds in professional environments are increasingly hiding behind technology.

Forgetting that fallible humans construct and program information technology, more and more corporate folk rely on what technology spews forth as fool-proof and reliable. Just think, for example, of how the erstwhile minefield of customer service has become a comfortable buffer zone for many organizations. Call centres are manned by outsourced operators locked into scripted solutions, while website interaction is limited to FAQ options.

There is neither the vested interest nor the ability to help out with unique or difficult questions.

In diagnostic environments, medical, forensic, etc., this dilemma is too scary to contemplate. Oftentimes experts seem more concerned with technical print-out than applying their minds to the subject of their attention.

Similarly, political, economic and corporate strategists and policy makers are relying solely on what Competitive Intelligence and Knowledge Management technologies produce. Unbelievably, when discussing strategic planning approaches, I hear so often: "I can't trust the human element!"

Has successful Risk Management become synonymous with risk avoidance?

The same is perhaps true of the media? Reporters seem to conveniently feed at the same electronic trough. Ideology notwithstanding, so many hot news items in diverse outlets these days all carry the same factual content and visuals.

- Secondly, there is demise of corporate loyalty... no, not reward points but rather good old-fashioned desire for long-term career investment and the sense of belonging to the right organization.

The up- and down-sizing of the past two decades every time the market hits a blip, has left employees with a mercenary edge that seeks to get the most for the least input. Talent management experts continue to tout the revolving door as a viable career model—then we wonder why many see no point in giving of their best. Or, worse, see overt or careless disloyalty as the norm.

- Thirdly, a decade-long drive for safety and accountability has resulted in a widespread one-size-fits-all, zero tolerance culture.

We are promised, and indeed appear to believe in, the manipulative illusion of thought-free certainty. This expectation seems so entrenched nowadays that the moment the untoward occurs, we cry for new regulation and legislation as the ultimate remedy. A message that, "this will never happen again".



While my legal background recognizes and appreciates the value of legislation and due process, the notion of law as the ultimate panacea is by definition unfair as it limits the possibility of interpretation and individual fairness. Criminal charges and pronouncements of innocence or guilt should not be the result of absolute application of the law. Surely, objectively applying rules and regulations in the context of subjective circumstance is the best shot we have at achieving equitable results.

Innovation and problem-solving are evidence of what it takes to rise to the occasion! Both attributes require unfettered thinking.

While we know the human condition to be imperfect, pretending that technology, outdated business models and blanket legislation will result in perfection is not only naïve, but dangerous. It will surely stunt originality and demotivate the leadership contribution of excellent minds.

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