

Not Knowing – A Leadership Proposition

by Jon Craighead

Successful executives rightfully take pride in their experience and their personal expertise. However, this thinking often makes it difficult for leaders to be open to consider areas and ideas that lie beyond their experience and familiarity. This puts them in a condition I call Not Knowing What You Don't Know. However, the mere recognition of this phenomenon makes available a distinct pathway to success.

Considering such realities as the speed of technology, our global interface, and our ever changing market environment, it becomes obvious that the scope of knowledge lies well beyond any single individual. In those times when there are so many questions that require answers, leaders need to take a time-out to collect and evaluate their thoughts and ideas. This highlights the critical role of today's leadership in the guidance and future of our organizations. When leaders are reluctant to separate themselves, at least temporarily, from the past, it subjects their enterprise to considerable risk which could otherwise be avoided.

There are many approaches leaders can take to assure they avoid the pitfalls of Not Knowing What You Don't Know. This article will consider two. The first calls for leadership to surround itself with dedicated and talented people – a key source of an organization's strength in dealing with a potential knowledge gap. These gifted individuals are empowered to conduct meaningful and diverse dialogue, promoting valuable interaction and problem solving.

In another effective method, key personnel representing a broad range of functions within the enterprise are removed from the day-to-day environment with the task to create or revisit the organization's core value proposition. The purpose here is for the team to conduct a renewed inquiry that will ultimately make that proposition a more current reality. For maximum impact, every dimension of the operation should be examined through the lens of the value proposition.

Some important conditions should be kept in mind. First, this team should not be restricted to senior executives but should include personnel who interact directly with your customer and vendor base as well. Additionally, the dialogue must go well beyond historical data and take into consideration preparing the enterprise for an unknown and ever changing future. Such an inquiry requires an objective awareness of emerging trends, what they indicate, and how to position the organization to meet the potential needs of your customer base. Counter-trends are equally important as they can bring additional clarity in distinguishing your value

proposition. Finally, it is critical to designate a niche that the business will serve as its designated market. Otherwise you will be trying to be all things to everyone, making you just one of the pack, indistinguishable from your competitors. You must be able to answer the question, What do you have to offer that's different from the others?

Taking on a stance of not knowing can give leaders a distinct edge, providing a platform for learning and development. Many people find it difficult to admit not knowing. However, being able to say "I don't know" actually enhances one's appreciation and respectability and opens the door for others to step forward. True learning can only occur in a culture of not knowing; otherwise it becomes a culture of who's right and who's wrong ó a foot nailed to the floor phenomenon. Exploration thrives in an environment of risk tolerance, swinging-out. Conversely, in an atmosphere of risk aversion and timidity, that culture will die.

Christopher Clark of Booz and Company stipulates that workforce talent is a strategic asset, an energy that builds the most critical capabilities of an organization. A purposefully designed culture of ongoing dialogue has people learn from mistakes and enhances robust decision-making ability. It makes it safe to fail, which stimulates innovation and creates vision, which motivates your team and serves your customer.

Rather than an indication of weakness, the embracing of not knowing gives leaders and their organizations a competitive advantage. It promotes exaltation of the human spirit. It awakens potential gifts and abilities that lie dormant, allowing us to soar to our highest expression. When leaders can stand in a position of not knowing, the benefits are enormous.