

2 — IF IT ISN'T BROKE, BREAK IT!

The past should not determine the future. Learning and knowledge are both lifelong and infinite.

— unknown

Our lives are governed, in a big way, by paradigms (a model of something). Clearly they shape our lives, and we often turn them into our daily rituals. How we dress; how we bathe; how we shop for groceries; how we purchase major items; how we work; and how we make decisions. These paradigms are the accumulation of our upbringing, our social interactions, our education and training, our life experiences. These, and others, shape how we do things; which products we buy; and how we approach our own daily work. We often hear the aphorism from our early years into adulthood: *if it isn't broke, let it alone.*³

We often talk about "common sense," as if everyone possessed it. It is so rare that we should call it "rare sense."

Imagine the consequences if we all followed this adage. We may never advance as a civilization, innovation would seldom occur, and in the words of Captain Kirk, "to boldly

go where no man has gone before.” Inventions, such as the ATM machine, would be relegated to the trash heap of ideas; the automobile could not have been conceived, and the reality of a mobile phone would certainly have never seen the light of day.

One of my main criteria I used for selecting doctoral candidates in my university programs was an innate passion for challenging the conventional wisdom and norms; I did not disparage them; I challenged them! Just because everyone does it that way, does not make it better or smarter. We often talk about “common sense” as if everyone possessed it. It is so rare that we should call it “rare sense.” Universities and organizations must be places for new learning, new ideas, new theories, and new practices — and all while knowing that everything worthwhile must be subject to continued scrutiny and validation.

For learning to advance, the current and old thinking must continually be evaluated, challenged, and built upon. How else do we get the products of the Galileos, the Isaac Newtons, the Emilie du Chatelets, the Thomas Edisons, and the Albert Einsteins? We have today more new ideas than we ever have had. I know more now at my current age, than I did yesterday. Where is it written that the past cannot be challenged? That one cannot learn after a certain age? That knowledge is finite? Learning and knowledge are both lifelong and infinite, respectively.

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If organizations want to leverage their most valuable resource — i.e., their human and organizational know-how — they must adopt this principle as a mantra and a way of behavior and action. The Total Quality Movement and Six Sigma grew out of this principle: that one can have

continuous improvement; that this is a never-ending quest. It is often said that if you don't grow, you die; if you don't innovate; you will be out of business. Organizations cannot afford paradigm paralysis and survive, let alone prosper.

There is another aspect to this breakage theme. Curiosity is a privilege of life, and if you are fortunate enough to possess it, then you can't help but to always examine the next layer; the next corner; the next whatever. Life-long curiosity means life-long learning, and never being satisfied with the current answer; the current state. I go back to the top leadership attributes in Adam Bryant's book: *The Corner Office*. One of the top five was "passionate curiosity." That's what great leaders possess. Bryant stated in a recent article (*New York Times*, 29 October 2017): "Leaders [...] share a habit of mind that is best described as 'applied curiosity.' They tend to question everything. They want to know how things work, and wonder how they can be made to work better." The beauty of the human mind is its infinite-like state. We can never get our fill, and we should never feel sated.

One of the most successful corporations I know was Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), which I joined as a Vice President in 1992. It was the largest employee-owned company at the time, and unusually highly successful, whether it was in profits, business won, or customer satisfaction. The CEO and founder, Dr. J. Robert Beyster, noted in a book he wrote as to the special sauce for his success (Beyster, 2007). He wrote that an essential element of any successful organization is "[...] the willingness to constantly experiment with new business entities, corporate structures, and staffing [...]" And did he ever experiment during my five years that I was part of SAIC.

In summary, an organization that cultivates curiosity and always seeking new things will be the one that innovates, always be relevant, and survives and thrives.



UPON REFLECTION...

- Is your organization gathering performance metrics to gauge performance? If so, how do those metrics compare to benchmark data or internal baseline measures gathered to evaluate a trend?
- Does the culture in your company perpetuate creativity or innovation? Is there an award mechanism in place?