Sacred Cows make Great Steaks

Corporate survival demands that companies learn to forget instead of forgetting to learn.

Many companies suffer from corporate myopia. Indeed, many individuals suffer from myopia as well. The things closest to us have the uncanny ability to blind us to the greater realities out there. Just consider this scenario you walk into the office first thing in the morning. What do you do? You plunge yourself into where you left off yesterday. When in difficulty, you try and recall a similar situation you faced in the past. Failing that, you go up to a more experienced person and take his/her advice. In short, you dwell on continuity- the continuity of work, the continuity of experience, and so on. That's fine when the circumstances are unchanging. But does it make any sense when every- thing around us is constantly changing? It makes me think of a 15th century man, suddenly finding himself stranded at a busy twentieth century traffic intersection, racking his brain wondering what this black snake (the road) with monsters whizzing by might be. Will his own experience or the experience of his peers be of any assistance? For sure, his peers would readily offer advice. Sadly, the situation is so unfamiliar that their advice can only harm the poor guy.

Now, why does this happen? Simply because the human mind is a patterning system. It stores information based upon experiences in its memory banks, and calls it up whenever required. That's why people with experience are considered very valuable. All this is true when change is slow, but not in today's world where change at the speed of lightening is grabbing us by our coat tails and flinging us around mercilessly.

The patterning system allows us to learn. So we learn as we grow up. Every experience is etched faithfully, albeit differently (based upon individual perceptions) in the mind. But what do we do when everything has been turned around into a topsy-turvy trauma?

The trick is what I call, 'learning to forget.' Organizations have got to get hold of themselves, stuff their egos into the closet, and learn to systematically forget lessons of the past. Because the past is not relevant. Of what relevance is the experience of the horse drawn carriage while you are sitting in a capsule in outer

space? In fact, it is a downright impediment to progress. Not only does it clutter the mind, it offers a false sense of knowledge.

Companies are no different. IBM has had to learn to forget why it was so successful in the sixties. Because Intel, Compaq, and Dell have changed the computer market beyond recognition. Because values are being redefined as the cost of technology plummets. Because funny but serious guys like Mr Microsoft and Mr Lotus won't stop at anything to dominate the computer market. European Airlines have to learn to forget that going it alone in the global travel business was the right thing to do. KLM and Northwest alliance changed all that. Why? Because treacherous world markets and adaptive corporations have changed the playing field as well as the rules by which the game is played.

When business is battered by deregulation a shift in buying habits, a sudden explosion of buying power (witness the emerging middle class of Asia and China) coupled with excess capacity, the raw power of technology, and who knows what else lessons from the past are about as useful to corporations as an umbrella held up against the powerful punch of a Force 10 hurricane.

Corporations and countries need to learn to forget quickly, and make way for new learning. Instead, they are doing precisely the opposite, i.e., forgetting to learn. Companies have to take concrete steps to put learning in their action plans. Sure, mission statements and luncheon speeches might refer to learning but where is the real learning taking place? Is learning rewarded? Real learning cannot take place unless organizations reward it. Haven't we learned from Pavlov's dogs and Skinner's rats that behavior can be modified only when modified !! behavior is rewarded?

Learning to forget requires intellectual leadership. The facts stare at us in the face, but we choose to ignore them, more so because the facts are scary. Top management somehow surrounds itself with human filters that ensure the real message doesn't ever reach it. If a certain event or fact doesn't fit within the framework of our past experience set, we quickly dismiss the event. Nothing can be more dangerous to long term corporate health. If a senior manager or CEO is uncomfortable with something, he/she rarely takes the trouble to examine it closely. The response is typical – a knee jerk reaction to kick it out of the way.

Well, let's face it corporations have no choice. Management will have to look at the way they do business and dismantle the old tried and tested methods. How many companies devote say one week every year examining their rules, regulations, and

assumptions? When you go away for your next semi annual shindig to some far off exotic land, make sure you include this in your agenda. If you don't, your competition will, and you can bet your boots you will find yourself in greater grief.

Learning to forget requires lots of new and young blood in the sinews of the organization. Curiosity and nervous excitement will be required in large doses. Where do these things come from? From fun-filled places of work. Curiosity, excitement, and fun cannot be measured, and that's the problem. Nor are they taught at even the most hallowed business schools. Instead, every business school graduate was taught to measure, measure some more, and even more. If possible, they would be taught how to measure what is being measured!

Capabilities lie in the heads of people. As of today, we do not know how to measure those capabilities. That is hardly a reason for focusing on what can be measured and ignoring the deeper issues. Can your people utilize their knowledge in a dramatic manner to fulfill corporate goals?

There is a serious message for employees here as well. If you are given the freedom to do what you like, and have fun as well, can you deliver the goods at the end of the day? No company can rely upon fun alone. The bottom line has got to be delivered as well.

Isn't it time company chiefs (and everyone else) started making serious attempts at learning to for- get? After all, don't sacred cows make great steaks?



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