

Unlearning is Hard

Unlearning is hard. We live in a complex world that is rapidly changing. Because of those changes, our efforts fail which can be a sign that we need to unlearn something. In order to succeed, companies are unlearning what they knew before and rapidly learning something new. This unlearning is stressful and can be too much for many people.

America has always changed rapidly. The Rip Van Winkle story illustrates

just how fast things changed even 150 years ago. In that story, someone who disappeared for 20 years encounters a radically changed society upon his return and has trouble adapting. Today, there are many who reject the

changes and cling to their old ideas. We see some waiting on the “grassy knoll” in Dallas for the return of their dead hopes. Some are convinced that they know the “God approved” world view and are rejecting changes.

In business, it is vital to keep asking, “what if I’m wrong?” Even when we have made a decision, we need to keep looking for the signs that we are on the wrong path and “fail early”. This humility before the marketplace and the rest of the world can keep us from total failure on the wrong path.

In business, we constantly have to unlearn what worked for us last year and learn what will work this year. This unlearning puts a premium upon the unlearning skill and makes it far more valuable than any other specific job skills.

Unlearning is not just about learning new facts. It is about accepting that we can be holding wrong ideas, paradigms, and even world views. It is about looking for the signs that we are wrong, looking for the data that disproves our pet theories, and having the willingness to question everything. We look back at historical data (with accounting) and engage with customers to find out what leading indicators we can find.

What types of things can we be wrong

about? People have been wrong about words they use, social behavior, tools, technologies, markets, customer understandings, business models, business ethics, mental models, paradigms, and even world views. The

paradigms and world views are the hardest things to identify as wrong and unlearn.

Unlearning can be done. Some ways to do that are to listen to those who hold contrary views and ask how much of those views could be right and how can we find what’s wrong in what they say. Often, there is a kernel of truth behind their views and identifying that truth can be powerful. Another way is to read extensively of research papers and reports. Hard data can show light on where we are wrong.

Unlearning may require changing tools, techniques, customers, employees, suppliers, and even our networking contacts. When we are on the right path, we will see that these changes are necessary and will make them no matter how difficult they are to do. Being on the right path pays off.

Unlearning is hard, but worth it.

Unlearning To Have A Future

Data Driven Progress

When we have made the decision to change, we have to define how to measure that change. Many people make business decisions based on feel or even less substantial reasons. Many attempts to change a business organization have been based on key personnel experiences instead of hard data. Wanting to change but not measuring the change is a way to flounder and never achieve the change we want.

Many companies hire for expertise and hope the hire will work out.

Unfortunately, that allows for several problems including those who talk well but deliver incomplete or someone who brags a lot but operates by intimidation of their staff (which often results in incomplete results). Many times, a change attempt is incomplete, or never gets off the ground, or fails because of situations outside the expertise of the person so hired.

Businesses can be quite complex and data about how they are operating can be hard to find or non-existent. The first step to manage change is to identify how to measure the desired change and install the process to collect the data on that change.

Change is done best when there is a “baseline” to measure against. However, when speed is of the essence, it is far better to simply install the change measurement and run.

There can be many steps to transform a company into one that uses data to drive decisions. Often it can take significant experimentation to find the right data to collect and monitor. Once the correct data is collected and analyzed, it can be a powerful push to better profitability.

A data driven process is far more likely to succeed.

Risky World

An author compares the “smart home” to a cat – it appears to have a mind of its own and does not consider you to be the master. Many software upgrades cause the device to fail or start doing strange actions. A number of upgrades add unwanted features. Sometimes, it is best to simply unplug the “smart device” and start living less “smart” but more intelligently.

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Prairie Trail Software, Inc



3821 Beaumont Lane
Plano, TX 75023

Address Service Requested

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