

Open to Listening

No one needs to tell us that the last few years have been challenging. The business environment has changed rapidly. What we knew about the marketplace isn't true anymore. We used to think that we had specific competitive advantages, but those are no longer the most important. Instead, our ability to adapt and learn is now the most important business competitive advantage that one can have. But constant change is also tiring. So, how do we keep ourselves agile and learning? We have to listen to many and to diverse voices. We do best to listen to all the constituents of the business.

Being open to listening is a style, not a technique. When we listen, we affirm that we don't know everything and value other people's opinions and experiences.

For a long time now, many businesses have operated with shareholders and owners as the most important voices to listen to. Yet, in a rapidly changing environment, they may not know enough about the market nor other aspects of the operating environment.

When the business is changing rapidly, it can be difficult to build and maintain the communications channels needed to hear from every constituent of our business. We do well to take time ever so often to check to make sure that we are listening to every voice we need to.

Several titans of business were known for reaching out to people in their business. Ed Whitacre Jr. reported that he would often talk to people at the

company cafeteria and simply introduce himself as someone who worked for the company. Likewise, Ross Perot would often introduce himself to new people. These chance meetings were a way to hear voices that often don't get heard at the top level of companies. Yet, those voices sometimes had information that needed to be heard up there.

To make sense out of situations, we may need both detailed insight and long range, outside perspective. Thus,

listening to those closest to the problem can give us the detailed insight but we may need to find outsiders who can give a different perspective.

In many companies, information has a hard time going up the chain of command but commands come down

quickly. The managers who do not listen do not hear the problems that occur until they can be closer to disaster. And managers who spend time to connect with and listen to their employees can have an easier time leading them. In some organizations, "360 reviews" and employee surveys have helped managers listen.

Taking the time to seek out those voices we have not listened to recently can be of great value. Much of the polarization of our country is due to people feeling as if their voices have not been heard. Over and over again, companies that have worked to listen to their customers gain good will and more. Companies that listen to their neighbors do better in most cases.

Let us be open to listening to as many voices as we can.

Listen To Many Voices

Steady States are Unstable

Many people want to go back to a time when they thought things were simpler. They hope that they can build a steady environment. Unfortunately, that steady environment they long for was unstable. It could never have lasted.

We have built quite a civilization on agriculture, mining, oil, and many inventions. The problem is that all of these wear out and fade away. Farm land topsoil washes away. Mines play out. Oil fields run dry. Even the way that the earth moves around the sun changes our climate minutely every year. Everything our civilization is built upon decays. Attempting to build a steady state civilization never works.

Our country has thrived by riding wave after wave of innovation. When a foreign leader claimed that his country would leave us in the dust because they were able to centrally plan massive steel production, we changed how we built wealth. We've gone from have wealth built on steel smelting to wealth built on automobiles to wealth built on computers to wealth built on the internet and cell phones. Instead of trying to have a steady state, we allow the freedom for new ways to make wealth. The companies that make up the leaders of the stock market have changed many times over the years. New companies always emerge with new ideas and new ways of making wealth.

People do not like change and can get scared. Instead of showing people how to fight change, it is better to show people how they can still thrive in the middle of change. When we assure folks that they are still valued in the middle of all the change, that can make a difference.

We live in a chaotic environment and steady states are unstable. We do well to continue to move to new ways of making wealth.

Risky World

Do you like classical music? Some people in the Seattle area can't change their car radio away from the classical station. A station sent information that didn't follow protocols that caused many car radios to lock up. Some radios are constantly rebooting while others simply can't switch stations. At least they aren't stuck on playing the same song over and over again.

A View from the Prairie is published by
Prairie Trail Software, Inc.,

**Making Information
from Streams of Data**

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