

IS THAT YOUR FINAL ANSWER?



Perceived pressure to know “the” answer gets in the way of fresh approaches to business challenges. What you can do to stay out of the trap.

Is that your final answer? When the leader asks you that question, you're apt to feel a twinge of fear. What's at risk isn't a million dollars, but your job.

Practically everyone values knowing the right answer or remembering a good idea. In business there seems to be no greater error than not being able to respond to the boss's questions. How many times have you been in a meeting and watched others make stuff up out of thin air rather than utter the words, "I don't know"? In fact, "BS artist" can be a mark of respect and signify someone who knows how to get ahead.

Overwhelming is not too strong a description for the apparent need to know everything. Doesn't it sometimes seem that being prepared is no longer possible? How can anyone keep up? You not only have to learn best practices, but also have to keep up with academics who are being stroked to write about their concepts (publish or perish), consultants who are packaging their abstractions in multi-million dollar engagements, and journalists who are looking to turn their notions into best sellers.

Recently, a wildly popular business magazine stuck a postcard on its front cover with the exhortation, "STEAL THIS IDEA." They wanted each reader to mail a postcard to a friend and infect them with an Idea Virus. Their logic was that "the big ideas that spread the fastest win," so unleashing an idea virus becomes the fastest way to turn your ideas into winners. The cover story's author, Seth Godin, is quoted as saying; "I'm an idea merchant who can come up with a half-baked idea every day."

For many business people this kind of thinking simply lacks common sense. For example, which would you say is more valuable for finding a fresh resolution to a problem, accumulated knowledge or reflecting on the right issue? Which would you say is more valuable for resolving your challenges and finding the route to sustained accomplishment, someone else's answer or discovering your own insights? Or, which would you say is more valuable for keeping your firm on the cutting edge and energized to make forward progress, an acknowledged "Big Idea" or the common sense of your own people?

The answers to these rhetorical questions are obvious. That's because they all share a common trait. Knowledge, answers, and ideas can be useful when routine actions are called for or known facts needed. For the quiz show contestant, there can be only one response to a factual question, such as: "Which of these four countries is completely surrounded by another?" But most business issues (in fact, most life decisions) do not call for neatly categorized responses. What they do require is a creative form that is responsive to the moment; in other words, a flash of insight that simplifies things, points to what needs to be done, ties up loose ends, and inspires pragmatic action.

What may be less straightforward is knowing how to take the road less traveled when you see everyone else rat-tat-tatting down the "answer the query now!" path. Actually, all it takes is to look within to see what is obvious and then, if it makes sense, to do it. But what, for heaven's sake, do you actually do?

Well, for one thing, you can take a few moments to reflect on the problem instead of struggling to remember an answer. By looking beneath the surface of things, you gain perspective. While answers for \$10 issues are a "dime a dozen," the \$10-million-dollar question stops everyone in their tracks. In the face of a truly worthwhile challenge, a pat response appears ludicrous.

Clearly, resolving these highly valuable questions takes more than glib answers. But what we tend to overlook is that it can be very energizing when people stop worrying about recalling facts and figures and start daring to look into what they don't know.

Looking into the unknown is akin to the process of being creative. Like an artist shaping clay, people exploring the unknown lose themselves as form emerges from the formlessness of the material. Their hand is guided by an intelligence emanating from the soul. It is the state of "feeling that things are right" instead of the feeling of "needing to be right" that directs action.

Feelings of urgency or anxiousness about outcomes have no place when you are in this state of mind. Rather, it is a sense of being in the flow of the moment, being surprised by the novelty of what comes forth, or being awed by the beauty of the result and grateful for it.

It also seems easy and effortless, although hours or days may pass before the obvious answer emerges, sometimes completely unexpected. Did you know that Einstein's famous equation, $E=mc^2$ came to him while he was sweeping the kitchen? But do not think for even one moment that it takes genius to explore inventively. All of us possess the human capability of having flashes of insight that come from beyond what we already assume we know. Young children do this all the time; we call it play.

We all have the power to direct our own lives and find our own answers for even the most urgent questions. This is simple logic. And we prove it to ourselves every day. We direct our lives by our own thoughts, for we are aware that we are the thinkers. As Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am."

So why is it we so often take off running with the first answer that crosses our path? Do we honestly think that happiness lies in the pursuit? That approach to thinking is like a hamster, infected by an idea virus, endlessly spinning the wheel in its cage and generating lots of motion but not going anywhere.

The art of looking within for the answers you seek has the practical benefit of raising your consciousness. From a higher state of consciousness, your perspective shifts to reveal more simplicity and beauty. What was puzzling becomes obvious. What was cloudy becomes clear. What was trite becomes profound. Truly, those who see the invisible do the impossible.

Surely, you have seen how people who are "wedded" to their answers can become very self-righteous and defend their view ever more loudly. It can be amusing to observe their befuddlement when someone confronts them with the obvious. They're suddenly like children who are so convinced that they have lost their toy that they continue to cry even as their parents are pointing to where the toy is lying across the

room. We call this losing perspective. It is self evident that the child is thinking from a lower state of mental quietude.

Well, we have all been there and done that! Anyone can lose perspective, but the key to living or leading others is knowing that it can be regained. Seeking to find answers outside our own creative powers is a bit like putting on someone else's shoes. They just don't fit.

The Uncertainty Principle of quantum mechanics suggests that we can either determine a particles' position or its motion, but not both. The choice the observer makes about what to look for influences the outcome. Isn't life a bit like this as what we choose to think becomes real for us?

Choosing to rely on yesterday's answers, last year's ideas, or the past century's knowledge may seem like the prudent course, the safe and certain direction. Life, however, is a game that is played in the moment. What may have been the perfectly right move yesterday may be the predictably wrong move today.

Of course, the details of life lend themselves to concrete answers. The plane to Chicago is scheduled to leave at 8:25 a.m. and to arrive at 11:45 a.m. That's useful to know. But we are making up almost everything else using our own thinking to create our own fresh ideas. These become our life. They make our dreams come true. And they bring us joy, happiness, and contentment everyday.

So if someone asks, "Is that your final answer?" find peace in recognizing that it is the best you can do at that moment. But find faith in knowing that you can continually create the answers you seek from the wisdom that is there for us all and found within our own consciousness.

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