

“It is not the ship as much as the skillful sailing that assures the prosperous voyage.” – George William Curtis



Lessons from History: The Eyes and Ears of an Army

Mark S. James | April 7, 2020

I am always fascinated by how the lessons of history can instruct us.



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They’re Out There. But Where and How Many?

The Battle of Gettysburg in the summer of 1863 was not a planned engagement. On July 1, small elements of the federal and confederate armies literally bumped into each other. A single confederate division moving toward Gettysburg in search of shoes happened upon Union cavalry. The rest of the confederate division was called up. But they could not dislodge the dismounted Union cavalry who succeeded in holding high ground, awaiting arrival of Union 1st Corp.

Meanwhile General Lee, commanding the Army of Northern Virginia, only found out through a spy that the federal army was on the move nearby. In those days, cavalry functioned as the eyes and ears of an army. But the confederate cavalry was miles away near Harrisburg. Without these eyes and ears, Lee did not know the size of the federal army heading his way.

The rest of both armies scrambled into the fray. Several attempts by Lee’s army to overcome the federal army across the entire line failed. The battle ended on the Fourth of July with General Pickett’s disastrous charge directly at the center of the Union line. Civil War historians refer to it as the “high-water mark of the Confederacy.” Even though the war raged on for two more years, the South’s military punch would never be the same.

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Ever since, historians have pondered how Lee might have succeeded had the eyes and ears of his cavalry been close as the battle unfolded.

Are the Eyes and Ears of Your Business Close?

By eyes and ears, I mean employees. And, by close, I mean regular dialogue with them. From this don't infer the data you have regarding customer attitudes, behavior and product acceptance does not provide “sight and sound” about what's happening. It does.

However, employees are the eyes and ears closest to what's going on in the market and with individual customers. They can tell you things in real time you can't see or hear from data alone.

Salespeople are naturally close to the market and customers. So, the temptation may be to rely solely on their eyes and ears. But there are others who see and hear things, too. For instance, employees who handle pick-up customers, product returns or inquiries about billing, to name a few.

It is important to encourage dialogue with all employees, not just those in direct contact with customers. Here's why. Think about how value flows to customers through what your business does, how and by who.

The interdependent working of your processes, employees and technology impact this flow of value. When barriers get in the way the flow of value suffers. The key then is to know where to look for performance gaps, missed opportunities and mistakes that diminish performance and value, across the entire organization. Three statistics are illustrative:

- Numerous research studies of typical organizations reveal 50-75% of the activity employees perform adds zero value
- Nearly two-thirds of employees are only one-third as productive as they could be because they don't understand what they are being asked to do (The Conference Board)
- 68% of customers who defect do so because they experienced a poor attitude or indifference toward their business (Canadian Manufacturers Association and insights from analytics)

How You View Things Changes What You See

In a recent article I talked about the famous 18th Century painting, *All is Vanity*, by Charles Allen Gilbert. In it a woman sits before what appears to be a mirror. But when you change how you view it the mirror becomes a human skull.

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Similarly, dialogue helps change what you see about your organization, away from a tendency to views things along functional lines or hierarchy, to a fresh perspective. Seeing through the eyes and ears of others exposes barriers and opportunities that would otherwise remain invisible.

Confusion, gridlock and low performance are common afflictions, lurking undetected in many businesses. Use dialogue with employees to help identify where they exist and get at their root causes. For example, consider how dialogue around the following questions can accelerate and sharpen improvements in employee knowledge/skill sets, processes and local manager support:

- Employee knowledge/skills
 - What do you like/dislike about company learning/training?
 - On a scale where 1 = Not at all to 10 = Completely, does the training/learning you receive from the company enhance your confidence to perform your job?
 - Is there anything you had to figure out “on your own” to do your job?
- Work Processes
 - Are the processes and tools you use to do your job easy to follow/use?
 - Are there things you are expected to do that are redundant?
 - Are there things you are expected to do that hurt the quality of the outcome?
 - What do you need to do your job better? What don’t you need?
- Manager Support
 - Does your manager help you find ways to improve how/what you do?
 - How often does your manager give you feedback on how/what you are doing?
 - Does your manager regularly discuss expectations about the job and opportunities for growth/advancement?

Avoid Being Part of the Problem

The more employees talk, the more you learn about them, operations, customers and the market. But you and your leadership team must engage dialogue techniques that unlock what they can tell you.

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And, two caveats to keep in mind:

1. Promise to listen AND respond to what they say
2. Be prepared to hear AND accept things that might be uncomfortable

Effective leadership is not about maintaining the status quo. Rather, it constantly focuses on ways to help people and things be better, more effective and successful. Being uncomfortable in such a pursuit should inspire action, not denial or withdrawal. Leaders not willing to accept these caveats, become part of the problem.

Simply asking, “What are we doing wrong?” is a very powerful question to energize dialogue. So long as one is prepared to listen and do something about it? Otherwise, like Lee at Gettysburg, one question will persist: What might have been?