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Posted on Tue, Feb. 12, 2008

Columbus, Georgia

Learn to focus on your own strengths

I've wasted more than one weekend in my life, but the first that comes to mind was a couple of years ago when I decided to recreate a fond childhood memory I have of my grandmother and I putting together jigsaw puzzles. We'd laugh and chitchat for hours, hunched over her chrome and Formica yellow kitchen table -- her sitting and me crouched on my knees in the chair across from her -- as each fitted piece put us one step closer to the photo we continually referred to on the lid of the puzzle's box. Usually a photo involving puppies or kittens, as I recall.

I optimistically purchased a kitten-themed puzzle for this promising activity. But when the weekend came to an end, all I had learned was that I hated putting together puzzles. No doubt it was whom I was with and not what we were doing that made time with my now-departed grandma so special.

On Sunday evening, I raked the half-completed puzzle into its box, mentally marking it as a yard sale item. No point in spending any more time and energy doing something at which I was clearly no good.

Too often, similar scenarios are played out in the work place. Employees are encouraged to work very hard on things at which they are not particularly good. The only difference is that when totally fed up with the exercise, the employee can't dump their duties into a box marked for disposal and move on to another project.

On a larger scale, companies can fall prey to the same situation, continuing to pursue areas in which they are not competent with the belief that if they just work hard enough, things will change.

What's wrong here? What's wrong is that we have been conditioned to focus on our weaknesses in the spirit of improving ourselves. But the fact is that a weakness is called a weakness because it is a weakness. I could practice singing for ten hours a day, seven days a week, and I'd still get laughed off of "American Idol." For some people -- and some organizations -- it doesn't matter how long the runway is. That pig ain't gonna fly.

The more formal term for the flying pig example is "appreciative inquiry," or AI. The basic idea is to develop employees and/or build organizations around what works, rather than trying to fix what doesn't.

It's funny to me that what seems like a common sense approach to management and leadership was not officially born until 1985 during a consulting gig by Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management (Cleveland). They were working with The Cleveland Clinic, which had been consistently ranked among the top hospitals in the country. As the team asked the clinic's employees questions focused on the positive aspects of their work, the wave of affirmative energy detected could not be ignored. Further, the interview process served to fuel the organization's positive core -- the attitudes, skills, and capabilities of the organization at its best. The result was a process called Appreciative Inquiry, a transformation tool for both organizations and individuals that focuses on learning from and building on current success.

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