

What You Don't Know Can Kill Your Business

Staying on top of your game and ahead of the pack in a changing world

Complexity and change are the hallmarks of our age. Things are happening so fast that it is almost impossible to keep up, even within our own industries. We're multi-tasking, triple-dipping, burn-that-candle-on-both-ends-and-the-middle-to boot, business-building go-getters, who only slow down for one thing: disaster.

As leaders in our organizations, the challenges are unending and our response is relentless: do more; do it sooner; do it better. We keep our heads down, our elbows up, and our feet in motion. In an ultra-competitive global marketplace where even the best held niche can crumble within our grasp, we have to be very good, very fast, and very alert—there's no time for mistakes.

But when you're pig wrangling, you're bound to get dirty. The intensity of the daily grind can induce what psychologists call situational blindness. Have you ever been deep in thought and driven right past the turn you needed to make? Ever spaced out your spouse's birthday,... AND your anniversary,... AND a lunch date with them all in the same month? (I have—fortunately I married a saint).

Situational blindness is dangerous because we don't know what we don't know.

All seems well, until the inevitable consequence wakens us to our oversight. Worse yet, situational blindness can be deadly—especially if our "blind spot" is our "soft spot". Take just a moment to scare yourself. What would you really ***hate*** to see happen, right now? How about losing a key employee? Or, Wal-Mart moving in next door? Or, your core technology becoming obsolete as an aggressive new competitor hits the street? Or how about changes in Federal regulations that in a stroke of a pen, unravels (or entangles) your business model in one swift stroke? These are a few of the cataclysmic issues I've seen. How about you?

As a leader in your organization, you must remain constantly hyper-watchful. In the age of relentless change and increasing complexity, if you do not actively pursue the strategy of remaining situationally aware, there will come a time when your next best strategy has to do with food stamps.

In my seminars, I frequently ask the question, "On average, how many hours a week do you work?" Corporate managers, department heads, directors and the like, report an average of 54 to 58 hours per week (excluding commute time). CEOs, division presidents, and in particular, the owners and operators of closely-held companies report (after some puzzled looks), their average hours worked per week as "***all*** of them!"

I know you don't have time to invest in becoming more aware. Now that we've got the whining over with, let's get on with it.

To begin, take a moment and assess your threat perimeter.

1. Are threats more likely to come at you from outside your organization, inside of your organization, or both?

If corporate leaders are to build coalitions, lead initiatives, and sway opinion, they must remain politically astute and internally aware. Closely-held business owners must always be alert to possible threats from within. In addition to remaining politically astute and internally aware, never forget that you might be training and developing your own competition.

2. Are changes in technology, science, or in the processing of information your driving issues?

Few organizations can escape this behemoth. According to Theodore Modis in his paper "*The Limits of Complexity and Change*", the present generation is witnessing the only time since the beginning of the universe where exponential increases in both the rate and complexity of change, in three different processes biological, social, and technological, are taking place all at once. Is it any wonder that the world seems a little crazy these days? I tell people in my keynotes that if they're not scared by the change occurring in their own industry, it's only because they're not paying attention.

3. Finally, make the most difficult assessment of all and ask yourself, "What am I doing to eliminate my blind spots"?

Obviously, that's a trick question. None of us can fully know what we don't know! But we can have the good sense to assume that we have at least a few persistent blind spots, and then constantly work to minimize them.

Make it a habit to find out what you don't know!

Case in point: My father's oldest brother had dropped out of school during the Great Depression to help feed the family. He spent his life as a small business person, notably in the sawmill business. His brothers and sister all went to college and in some cases, amazing careers. At a family reunion I noticed that Uncle Herbert could discuss with great depth and knowledge most any subject his more learned siblings brought up. "Uncle Herbert," I playfully asked, "I thought you quit school in the 8th grade, how'd you learn so much?" He smiled and seemed to stand a little taller as he replied, "I quit school, but I didn't quit learning. Nobody can afford to stop learning."

Make learning a habit. Read, observe, ask, listen. Harvest the wisdom of those around you by engaging their intellect.

When you make the assumption that everyone you meet can add to your wisdom, you'll rarely go wrong.

When you make harvesting wisdom an everyday action item, you'll find that staying alert and aware isn't a time consuming chore. Rather, staying alert and aware can become the fuel that drives your organization's creativity, agility, and long-term success.

I recommend that you spend 30 minutes every week on a knowledge hunt. If I knew what you don't know, I could be more specific, but of course I don't (and neither do you!) So look at it like this: there's something out there that you need to know.

These few steps you can extend your consciousness, heighten your receptivity, and help you keep in touch with the changes impacting your organization.

Change is not to be feared, it is to be expected. And if you remain situationally aware, you will be far more likely to benefit from the shifting, morphing, and the inevitably exploding bursts of evolutionary changes occurring at this very moment.

For the situationally aware, opportunity abounds.

