

Bob Gunn, Editor

The Freedom of “Not Knowing”

BY ROBERT GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

With endless to-do lists and the constant demands for attention from e-mail, pager, phone, fax, and all the other tools of 24/7 “efficiency,” we can easily lose sight of the essence of our job. Where is the greatest return on our energy? Where should we direct our attention in

service of our organization’s aims?

In a nutshell, managers, leaders, and executives must harness the invisible spirit of people to accomplish things together that they could not do alone. To that end, our best ROI comes from deployment of four intangible levers of power. They aren’t hard and fast methods of getting from point A to point B that can be learned by rote. They are tools that come from an inner resource and are accessible to all of us if we only slow down our busy minds and turn our thoughts away from anxieties, comparisons, and second guesses. These levers are:

- *Clarity*, a blinding glimpse of the obvious accompanied by a feeling of utter confidence in one’s perspective.
- *Declaration*, certainty of one’s purpose and values and fearlessness

in voicing them in service of the organization’s goals.

- *Enrollment*, inspiring people to voluntarily and wholeheartedly put

their energy into the cause—not only because of external incentives but also because they want to feel a part of something larger than themselves. This elicits feelings of profound gratitude.

- *Execution*, sustained progress with a growing sense of momentum and deserved pride in the accomplishments, resulting in exhilaration.

Working with these four levers transforms leadership from a duty to a thrill. And it all begins with clarity.

Clarity springs from insight—the doorway to an infinite consciousness, to the wisdom of the ages, to the knowledge at which spiritual advisors, prophets, mystics, and philosophers keep pointing. As Socrates said, “All knowledge is just remembering.” The veil lifts; our mental fog clears; the serendipity of events, the small miracles of everyday life, and the hidden connections between people come to our aid.

Paradoxically, the more we are willing to admit what we don’t know, the better chance we have at



ILLUSTRATION: SUSAN LEVAN/ARTVILLE

clarity. But most managers believe that they get paid for having the right answer. The idea of “not knowing” seems contradictory and foolish. And much of our early educational experience centers on true/false tests. The child who says the correct answer first is acknowledged and praised. That reinforcement, acted out over 12, 16, even 20 years of educational experience, is like a deep river channel—it’s hard to see over the bank, much less climb out.

Freedom from having the right answer is the path to using the collective brainpower of everyone around you. When people see that you are serious about “not knowing,” they will contribute their best thinking to the issue at hand. They will understand that you are counting on them. Help focus their mental energy by asking questions in a straightforward way—not in a testing or challenging tone, but with genuine curiosity: “What are *you* thinking?” instead of “*What* are you thinking?”

Overcoming deeply ingrained habits of “being right” and “being sure” isn’t easy, but it can be simple. You may have seen that fact during a crisis. For example, legendary test pilot Chuck Yeager—the first to fly a jet faster than the speed of sound and the role model of the “right stuff”—has described his experience when all engines failed. Hurling toward the earth with just seconds to avoid becoming a stain on the landscape, Yeager had no time to sift through instruction manuals or fret about why things weren’t going as he expected. Instead, he opened his mental channel, allowed ideas to pop into his head, and then followed through on them deliberately, one by one, until something clicked. Al-

though his plane was falling at hundreds of miles an hour, Yeager described a sensation of thoughts coming methodically, almost slowly, in heightened focus.

When we or our businesses face situations that threaten our survival, we may experience Yeager’s kind of steadfast determination. Crisis can shock us to a kind of mental stillness. We are forced to admit that what we thought we knew isn’t enough and to put aside our usual concerns. That allows the mental space for a fresh thought to emerge.

But don’t wait for a crisis. It’s far better to use the power of insight when things are going well. Turn your back on “being sure” that you always have the right answers. Let insight bring you the leader’s gift of clarity.

Connection to the inner resource that all of us have is just a thought away. The distance between despair and elation is literally the gap between one thought and the next. Can you measure that?

Begin to practice greater clarity by becoming aware of your habitual ways of thinking. For example, do you find yourself going over and over all the reasons something can’t be done? We can get mentally stuck just thinking about all we have to do: “Oh, my gosh,” goes the mental chatter, “Woe is me. I have so much to do and no time to do it.” Again and again and again, these thoughts drone on. Along with them comes the emotion of being tired, of feeling weighed down by the world. In that frame of mind, it’s difficult to find a fresh thought.

Turning things around can begin with the awareness: “I am never going to have the energy to accomplish anything if I just keep dwelling on all the chores I have to com-

plete.” The key is to pay attention. Wisdom is knocking on your door. Act on it!

Have the willpower to stay with “not being sure,” hard as that might be at first. Instead of rushing to act in typical “ready-aim-fire” fashion, take a mental breath and see what occurs to you. This may seem unnatural at first, but retuning your internal guidance system to recognize and act on insight will get easier, and those old busy-minded, energy-sapping images will no longer occupy your working day.

Human thought processes are built for generating powerful insights. As a leader, your number one job is to sustain an environment that encourages the clear-headedness to leverage fresh thoughts. That means you must insulate your teams from fatigue, stress, worry, anger, burnout. Therefore, the most important thing you can do is to attend to your mental well-being. Don’t get overly tired or take on too many commitments, and be sure to exercise, eat well, and get enough rest. The benefits will ripple out to your entire team.

What’s truly necessary to be a leader is to have clarity about your own purpose: an unwavering commitment to understanding human values—having respect for all of life and a set of personal values that reflect purpose and universal laws—and the willpower to live them. ■

Bob Gunn is the co-founder of Prescient Leaders, a consulting firm focused on executive effectiveness. You can e-mail Bob at rgunn@prescientleaders.com.

Betsy Raskin Gullickson was an EVP for Ketchum Communications and is now a leadership coach and author.