Bob Gunn, Editor

The Adolescent Manager

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

Steve was ready to make the hire. He'd sifted through résumés until he'd found an ideal match to the specified background. He had the best phone interview ever and a great first meeting. Then his boss weighed in: Yeah, the guy seemed good, but his experience was all with mainstream companies, and this was a start-up with a unique platform. Was Steve sure that the candidate could "think outside the box"?

Now Steve is wavering. He knows that decision making is a fundamental skill of a good leader, and he's been working to develop it since he was promoted to manager a year ago. He thinks he's following the right process and feels his judgment is sound. But he also holds his manager in high regard. Can he marshal facts and change his boss's mind, or should he shrug off the boss's comments and proceed?

In his progression as a leader, Steve has reached a kind of adolescence—a stage between the need for constant direction and confident maturity. He has experienced and learned enough to be able to sort through data, but that's just Step One. Every decision has a measure of risk and uncertainty. Before we make a decision, possibilities abound. As soon as we commit to one course, we've given up others—without a guaranteed outcome.

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Sooner or later, every decision requires a leap of faith into the unknown. That's why Step Two in becoming a good decision maker is recognizing emergent insights and following your gut. How does a manager master that? And how does someone's "superior" help? Perhaps this mystery can be solved by the lessons we've learned the hard way from confronting the world's most difficult creature—the teenager.

Every parent watches the efforts of teenagers to make their own decisions and live with the consequences. And every parent has a role in an important part of the struggle—helping teenagers to find the way to hear and speak their own "voice" in dialogue with someone "older and wiser." Rejection, defiance, and refusal to listen to parental guidance is, of course, a familiar pattern. As Mark Twain famously said, "When I was 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have him around. When I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

Maturity in decision making—for a teenager and a manager—involves the ability to stand on their own *and* to respect the input of others.

Consider Bob's 17-year-old son, Remy. A devoted father, Bob has a

long-established pattern of providing solutions to his son's problems. If he stays on autopilot, Bob falls into the trap of telling Remy what he ought to do. That worked well when Remy was seven, but, at 17, Remy is almost sure to ignore Bob and do it his way.

Remy can get very attached to his answer. And things do work out for him…some of the time. Often when Remy thinks he "knows," however, he ends up in the school of hard knocks—learning from his mistakes. You may know the saying, "Good judgment comes from experience; experience comes from bad judgment."

But when Remy adopts a stance of inquiry and curiosity, then he and Bob are more likely to have a great conversation. Of course, Bob needs to stay just as curious and just as open to what Remy has to say, looking for what's surprising rather than what he knows is "right." The feeling is the key. Any sense of patronizing, any hint of manipulation or whiff of disrespect, and the conversation is over. In other words, both parties must put aside the superior/subordinate mind-set and simply interact as two humans: talking, sensing, and learning about whatever the situation calls for.

As it is with teenagers, the name of the game for the "adolescent manager" is reflection—to see what may be underneath the surface of things and, equally important, to learn via insight. For example, Steve's boss may well be unconsciously competent—that is, he is able to listen to his intuition and pick up on feelings—but he may not have much understanding of how these human processes actually work. Steve's boss may say, as so many others do, "I know it when I see it."

Steve's self-awareness also is rudimentary. His best strategy is to connect with the boss on a deeper level—one that will improve the quality of thinking of both parties. One action that seems obvious would be to sit down with the boss and explore his comment. What does out-of-the-box thinking look like in the context of this business or job? What are the personal qualities that match up to the essential values of this young, growing company? And what qualities of thinking make for a great hire?

The concern Steve's boss is raising may be more profound than he even realizes: How does this candidate show up in terms of his attachment to the "right answer"? This is an issue for all kinds of companies, but start-ups in particular are all about what they don't know instead of what they know. The very nature of new ventures places an incredibly high value on learning, and that drive creates fresh solutions.

While its goals may be clear, a young company has a lot of work figuring out what and how to do virtually everything in ways that will lead to marketplace success. People who have the mind-set of "I already know" will predictably flame out. Their own attachment to answers will lead them to assume too much force-fitting solutions, or they'll avoid doing the interesting but hard work of creatively generating fresh approaches. As baseball immortal Satchel Paige said: "It's not what you don't know that hurts you. It's what you know that just ain't so."

Steve has much to gain by reframing the discussion with his boss. Instead of debating if the candidate is good enough, he should be probing, asking, "What value do we place on holding 'right answers' lightly, and can we discern how this candidate matches up with that value—not necessarily by what he's done but by how he shows up?" The process of exploring these or related questions can stimulate joint learning for both Steve and his boss.

Steve may also benefit by switching his focus from the content of his answers to the process by which he makes decisions. He has had enough experience to be able to point to situations in which he made good calls. But no matter how many times that happens, he still feels insecure about his ability to make the *next* decision. He can become *consciously competent* by noticing what works: When he is quiet-minded, listening for whispers of insight, he has access to his innate resources of wisdom, experience, and knowledge.

To be good decision makers, we must accept how little we actually know, how rarely we can truly be sure of *anything*. We must keep our minds open and broad enough to contain different points of view even though we must act on just one. And we must have the confidence that we'll be able to make things right in the end even if a decision doesn't work out as intended. It doesn't begin with knowing all the answers but rather with getting comfortable asking questions and tapping all available resources—internal as well as external. ■

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