

James Butler's Newsletter #61

Amuse, Inform and Inspire

September 2007

This month I have been inspired by a long-term newsletter reader who recently became a client (it never ceases to amaze me how this happens – so never think you have left it too late to give me a call). As I then pondered how to convey this inspiration here, I realised a number of other recent experiences linked in well with the theme, and here we are.

At least two clients have faced similar situations, in different ways, but as you would expect, I can't share their particular circumstances here. But the essence of the theme is that sometimes we can set great plans, work very hard to realise them and then, through no fault of our own, we fall short of that goal. What can we do?

Mysterious Ways

The new client is someone I have admired since we met a couple of years ago. She has great drive and an ability to get things done – as well as being able to motivate others to do the same. It was therefore a surprise to hear that some of the plans she developed in recent years had failed to turn out as she wanted. Was she a failure?

Well, not really as it turned out, because circumstances had changed which made her original goal less relevant. But as we discussed this it became clear that the underlying desire or purpose behind the goal had been fulfilled, just in a different way. Those who attend church may chip in now with "The Lord works in mysterious ways". Whether there is a Lord or not isn't for this newsletter, but the sentiment I agree with.

Sometimes the playing field changes, and it is no longer relevant or important to attach ourselves to a particular outcome. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate the point.

An airline pilot is flying a passenger plane from London to New York. He knows what it takes to achieve that, plans how he is going to get there, checks he has the right aircraft, fuel etc and sets off. On the way he gets his navigator to check progress, and adjusts his course to stay on target to achieve his goal. As he nears the East Coast of America, he gets a report saying New York is fog bound, and he must divert to Washington. He won't achieve his goal.

If he were attached to closely to that goal (or the loss of face or pride associated with not achieving it), he might try to land in New York anyway, endangering himself, his crew and his passengers. Or he might realise that the bigger picture is that the passengers wanted to get to America, alive, and that Washington is a better compromise than to die trying to get to the Big Apple direct. The pilot must evaluate what the purpose behind the goal was – what did the goal really mean to him/his passengers?

On a personal level, I have experienced this with Choko, the charity project I am closely involved with. Where it is now is very different to the original goals Bev and I started with – in the best way possible. In fact, we have stopped setting goals and visions, because they seem to limit our perception of what can be achieved! In the first couple of years, the committee developed the idea that our fundraising would be based around events, hopefully organised by other people. This recognised our limited resources, and the goal of engaging the whole community.

Then our circumstances changed, new people joined the team, and their strengths opened new possibilities. The new people, and our trip to our linked community in Africa in April, also seemed to inspire greater creativity within the team. So now we have a new strategy, where we are selling products to raise funds, and the committee have developed initiatives that they can be very proud of, but would never have conceived even six months ago.

As a team we have recognised a change in circumstances, reacted to the appearance of new strengths and abilities and adapted what we do to make the best of our current situation. As a result, I do believe we will achieve far more for our partner community, and our own sense of purpose.

(If your interest is piqued, please do visit www.choko.org.uk and have a look at the products we are now selling. You need go nowhere else for you Christmas shopping – we have a superb offering of Christmas cards, 2008 calendars and Alternative Gifts. Any purchase will directly contribute to development projects in our partner community in South Africa.)

Darwinian Survival

So, we can all face challenges or changing environments that take us away from the path we planned – how should we react?

Firstly, it helps to know the path you planned. I am sure that regular readers, clients past and present and those who have attended some of my training days/workshops will have goals set out for the coming years (You don't? Well, now's a time to start!).

Once we know our planned path, we can then routinely review how we are progressing, and whether circumstances have changed that may alter the path we want to follow. (Remembering that a change can be for a good reason, as well as the result of a problem).

Darwin's theory of evolution is often misquoted – he did not argue that evolution was about survival of the fittest. What he advocated was that evolution is the survival of those best able to adapt. Human evolution developed rapidly when our ability to walk upright increased our mobility, and we could adapt best to climatic and environmental change millions of years ago.

Now, in the 21st century, our personal success will come from our ability to adapt to changing circumstances. How will we change how we act at work, how our business operates, how we create the life we want as external factors change the canvas on which we must create our success?

To adapt to our best advantage, we must be very clear what is really behind our plans or goals – what do they truly mean to us? If we are clear on the purpose behind our goals, we will know better how to adapt if circumstances make the original plan unviable.

That process can be best achieved in discussion – perhaps a topic for a team meeting, or for work with your business adviser, mentor or coach. How will you explore what is behind your goals?

In summary, plans are generally written on paper, not set in stone, and we need to recognise when they need to change. Our success comes from adapting to change in the best way to meet our true goals and purpose. To do that, we need to follow just four steps:

Play to Your Strengths – be aware of what you/your team are good at, and play to those. If the team, or you, change circumstances, or an external factor creates opportunities for new strengths, consider how you can react.

Adapt to New Circumstances – the dodo couldn't adapt to a world where being large and flightless meant you were likely to be shot by imperialist explorers. And we know what happened to them.

Keep in Mind the True Purpose – maybe the dodo was attached to staying a large flightless bird, and didn't want to change when the circumstances required it. If their goal had been to stay alive as a species, maybe they would have trimmed up and flapped their wings a little. (And now I'm smiling recalling the Tae Kwon Dodos in Ice Age – you have to see them!)

Buy Christmas Cards, Calendars and Alternative Gifts from Choko.org.uk – ok, that is a totally unsubtle, unsubliminal plug – but you would be helping me achieve what I feel is my purpose. You can't blame me for trying!

Painless Business News

Last issue I quoted a workshop attendee who had said "Thanks for an excellent workshop in July. It has certainly worked." That came from James Shand of vfdnet.com (surely the only place to go for virtual Finance Department Support – credit control, bookkeeping, management accounts and Finance Directors all provided!). Well James was kind enough to join me again for the workshop last week entitled "The Price is Right", so I felt he deserved a plug.

That workshop was an example of the work I like to do – working with business owners to help them take a fresh look at their business, learn from others and go back to work with a plan of how to make their business better (dare I say Painless). Whether it is through reading this newsletter, attending the workshops (there will be another before Christmas) or working with me and my team on a direct basis (we have space for a few more clients), there is a lot you can do to give your business a little push.

We have less than 100 days left in 2007 – what will you do to make the most of them?

This Friday I gave a presentation on generating referrals. I still find that the best way of getting new work – because there is a high chance I will enjoy working with those clients if they are referred by people I know and like. So, if you know anyone who could do with help in their business life, or would like to read this newsletter, please connect us. And thanks to all those of you who do that regularly.

Book Review

I am currently enjoying *The Undercover Economist* by Tim Harford, a book in the mould of Freakonomics, Blink or The Tipping Point – all of which I think I have reviewed in this newsletter. Harford brilliantly challenges some assumptions society can make, and explains economics in a very accessible format. It's another book that deals with the price of coffee – which seems to show the driving force in our economy nowadays!

And now for something a little different. A country review! Many of you will know that Bev and I love to travel and have been lucky enough to experience a wide range of places. This month we went to Luxembourg for the first time, and would heartily recommend it. The city was fairly nondescript (in my humble opinion), but the countryside was gorgeous. The Moselle valley was beautiful, and some of the chateaux are breathtaking. As a European, it was also fascinating to be at the heart of Europe, seeing what integration really means.

What was fascinating, given my reading of an economics book, was the impact of tax regimes on countries with open borders. Shengen is a small village on the border of France, Germany and Luxembourg. It has petrol prices lower than French or German petrol prices, so it has EIGHT petrol stations in a row – for a population of about 400 people!

Painless Puns

If our topic today is how we react to circumstances, there is an obvious quote to share:

An optimist thinks this is as good as it gets, a pessimist fears the same. Anonymous

Now, I don't want you to think I have driven my wife Bev to drink, but she like this quote this month:

If life deals you lemons, don't despair. Look round for the gin and tonic. Anonymous

After mentioning my travels, of which I still have some more to do in 2007, Benjamin Disraeli had an interesting perspective:

Like all great travellers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen.

Wise words.

Some people are still kind enough to send notes of appreciation for the humour included within this section. Regular readers will recognise that my taste is for the painful pun, so if you groan, I will have achieved my intention, and if you smile, I will have achieved it too.

On a recent flight, I was alarmed when a vulture boarded the plane, carrying two dead rabbits. Luckily the stewardess spotted the problem and asked him to leave. He created a bit of a fuss, but the stewardess was firm "Only one carrion per passenger".

Before subjecting you, the reader, to these puns I decided to road-test them with Bev. I thought if tell her ten puns, at least one would make her laugh. Sadly, no pun in ten did.

Get it?

Final Words

My experience with this client this month has given me an opportunity to review my own plans and goals, and whether circumstances have changed for me (a topic I shall mull over with my coach). I hope you create an opportunity to do the same, and ensure you are on the right path, true to your purpose and not holding out for an historic aspiration which is no longer what best works for you.

Whatever goals you pursue, have a great month.

Warmest regards

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Careful assessment of your needs ensures that the most appropriate intervention is supplied – whether one to one ongoing coaching, strategic reviews, training events or facilitated group exercises within a team.

To discuss how you can painlessly build the business you want, call James today for a no-obligation discussion of your situation.