

Adaptive Governance? Why Not?

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Corporate Governance and Business Transactions

14 articles

Eighth in a Series

Age, Experience, Knowledge—life’s highways to Wisdom, Competence and Success. Like most highways, these include the potholes as well. Along the way, one gets peeks at the universes inside the heads of bartenders, baristas, and bakers. The guy who works on your car, or the mason who builds that stone wall. Amazing what they know... and we don’t. Others just seem smarter and smarter the longer we journey on. Mark Twain owns that classic crack, of how much smarter his dad became as Mark morphed from ages 14 to 21. [\[1\]](#)

As we grow, and survive the bonehead years, we become what some call “aware.” We “adapt” to our evolving circumstances and increasingly learn that DIY-ing our way through life can be hazardous. Few of us can “Do It My Way” *a la* Sinatra.

Organizations evolve and travel their journeys in like fashion. Success or failure grow over time as business and political climates shuffle the deck, sometimes dealing from the bottom. Whether our Organization’s arc bends toward historic awards or an extinction-level event (ELE) involves performance over time.

In their timeless *magnum opus*, the Heifetz team suggests five basic qualities of a healthy Organization with what they call an “adaptive culture.” [\[2\]](#) These speak directly to effective Governance as well. In such a Company, we:

Name our elephants in the room

Share responsibility for our Organization

Expect timely exercise and voicing of independent judgment

Develop our leaders, present and future

Institutionalize reflection and continuous learning

Elephants. Most of us have at least one or two roaming around; others see herds loping all over our Organization. Every now and then, we run out of peanuts and the place goes rogue. But Lord help the one who spots one and points it out.

Shared Responsibility. Killing off the “Us Versus the Home Office” virus is tougher than developing a vaccine. Human capital thinkers and managers wear themselves out to imagine and grow a culture where employees, managers and the C-Suite all sense genuine responsibility as members of a team. Responsibility cannot be dictated by policy or the “people at the top;” it is inspired and encouraged. And hey, “leaders,” everyone else in the comp range is watching; their sense of inspired responsibility is directly proportional to what they see in you. They either can shine or sit back and play the comp-preservation game and collect retirement travel brochures.

Independent Judgment. This actually is a capital crime in some Organizations. Few are willing to say “something stupid.” Even fewer are willing to speak up at crucial moments. Most defer to “the smartest guys in the room.” Only gifted leaders know and practice the principle that no idea is a “non starter,” that we protect our “troublemakers,” and that it takes but one unguarded facial gesture, exasperation, inconsiderate “evaluation,” or mental abuse to extinguish independent judgment.

Develop Leaders. Classic Dangerfield put-down in *Caddyshack* to some young rich punk: “*Now I know why tigers eat their young.*” Not just tigers, Rodney. Organizations munch on rising talent all the time; and yes, the bones do crunch. Maybe it’s a culture of “one strike and you’re out,” or one where ideas and initiatives are snatched and misdirected. Especially now, with age longevity and deferred retirements, we have three and four generations working together. Do we, feed and mentor our tiger cubs with patience and fairness? But see next paragraph.

Reflection and Learning. In just thirty years, we went from mailing letters to texting around the world. The trend crept along slowly at first, then faster and faster. A fax on your chair that arrived during lunch with a deadline that expired an hour ago. A voicemail, then a message on your Palm Pilot or Blackberry. Office 360 and Adobe for mobiles. Kilobytes, gigs, terabytes and so forth. Once it was “What have you done for me lately?” Now it’s “What will you do for me next week? Or Right Now?” We yearn for time to think, reflect, and learn. But it all spins faster. We slice life in tenths

of an hour. How many Organizations leave our precious people-capital to figure out a way to “Just Do It?” Blessed are they who protect and grow so-called “unproductive cost centers” to learn, maintain and help us remember how to do these things.

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Yours for Better Governance

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[1] “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to 21 I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” Mark Twain.

[2] Heifetz, Grasow, Linsky, *Adaptive Leadership*, Harvard Business Press 2009, pp. 101, 165. (Note: If HBP had asked, we might have suggested the subtitle: “*How to Do Leadership Without Losing Your Mind.*”)