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Media Business
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The Interdependence Bounty

Shared Knowledge Generates Energy to Use for Growth of Business, Relationships

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

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In January we began to cover subject matter designed to help media planners use growth principles to raise the bar on planning efforts. The first two discussions focused on time and environmental change. Last month we discussed the importance of making two critical decisions in the face of environmental change: committing to change and seeing opportunities instead of problems.

Even if perspective can be maintained to make tough critical decisions in the face of changing environments, without careful consideration, we can become our own worst enemies with regard to attaining real growth.

At the point we know we need to right a situation and we want to take action, we are disposed to roll up our sleeves and do

something about it. But in a changed environment, proactive orientation can become a dangerous blind spot.

Our confidence, knowledge and skills give us the illusion we do not need to look outside of ourselves to address changing circumstances. The inherent problem is that the marketplace has changed. Circumstances under which we previously flourished are now different than those we had mastered, and we do not likely have the acumen necessary within ourselves to address the new environment.

While it's difficult, we must with humility and maturity realize we are dealing with circumstances beyond our experience and bravely reach out to others for a helping hand.

The Maturity Continuum

One of the powerful insights Stephen Covey shares in his book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" is the construct of the maturity continuum. The maturity continuum has three basic phases: dependence, independence and interdependence.

As infants, human beings are entirely dependent on others for their needs and survival. As we age, we learn, grow and become more independent, gaining skills and capabilities required to obtain things we need or want for ourselves. But at some point, we gain the maturity to realize that higher levels of success cannot be achieved unless we develop relationships with and work with others.

From a business or career perspective, changing market environments are exactly a situation calling for us to step up and work interdependently with others. Acknowledging the need for help from another individual or organization is a courageous step for anyone, but it is one that must be taken to truly grow. Interdependent effort combines skills, generating more than was there before-the very definition of growth.

In their book "Every Business Is a Growth Business," Ram Charan and Noel Tichy describe Dell as an organization that has demonstrated the fundamental of reaching out to others to facilitate growth. In the early '90s Dell experienced a critical point in the company's development. Pursuit of growth by managing profit was becoming institutionalized. Wall Street was beginning to question Dell's ability to generate true growth at a time when the category was booming.

Dell changed executive-level perspective by infusing management with senior talent from Motorola, HP and Apple. The new managers brought outside perspective to the organization and helped Dell leadership see the world differently. What Dell learned from mining its new resources enabled it to adapt to marketplace changes in a positive way. Dell's market results followed accordingly.

Benefits of Interdependence

Working with others is imperative in facilitating growth because it opens the door to advantages we as individuals cannot obtain through our own efforts: new perspective; new tools, like information, skills and contacts; and division of labor

New Perspective

Perhaps the most important advantage gained in working with others is the benefit of new perspective. When we become ingrained with habits and practices learned from plying a successful approach in a familiar environment, we come to see every problem in the same light. Over time we unwittingly constrain our perspective into the limited fishbowl of our experience.

Working with others, we gain the benefit of the perspective they have from outside our fishbowl. If we are open to listening and understanding, we allow ourselves to see situations from a completely different point of view. We get a better sense of the forest, not just the trees.

New perspective is valuable for two reasons. First, problems posed by changing environments are viewed more completely, which means we come to better understand what we are facing. Second, we gain a better sense of what is possible given the situation. Being better informed in these two ways helps generate positive energy that can be used for growth.

New Tools

If one doesn't have the acumen necessary to address the new environment, acumen must be obtained from an outside source to successfully adapt. When we work with others, they become the source of the new information, skills and even contacts we need to grow. We don't have problems in our personal lives going to doctors, lawyers, accountants or mechanics for help. We shouldn't feel shy about reaching out to specialists in other facets of media, advertising or marketing when we face unfamiliar situations while plying our trade.

It's also important to note that working with others is not a one-way street. People with specialties in other areas will also benefit from their interactions with us.

That reciprocity is the essence of interdependence at the pinnacle of the maturity continuum and a key to advancing through the growth process.

Division of Labor

Having more hands available to bear the burden lightens the load. The stress of having to complete a task alone can be significant. When multiple parties pitch in on tasks, not only can work be done more quickly, alleviating time pressures, but the resulting participatory camaraderie also boosts morale.

How can media people do a better job of reaching out and bring others into the planning process to find the help we may need? As the critical decision-making discussion suggested, once we commit to a change orientation and begin to see the opportunities before us, the first thing to do is to reach out for assistance.

Planning Partnerships

In media planning, there are a number of occasions ripe for partnership:

- Brainstorming sessions are a wonderful way to include others with diverse experience in areas unfamiliar to us. Beyond including planners from other brand groups, there's also the wealth of people from the broader account team, clients, the rep community or even consumers that can bring valuable perspectives and insight.
- Working closely with account planning and creative people is a must. It's also fair to say the earlier planners can open a dialogue with their counterparts, the more productive the relationship can be. Timely interaction better informs the team earlier in the planning and creative process, increasing the chances of truly outstanding ideas being created.
- Hiring people with unique backgrounds can pay big dividends later on. During the interview process, there may not be an obvious need for new skills or perspective, but there will come a time when a person with a somewhat eclectic background has tremendous value because they see the world differently. Proactive hiring can lead to serendipity later.
- Bringing reps closer into the planning process is something many planners mistakenly shy away from. Planners tend to ask for specific information or demand rigid adherence to requests for proposal. In doing so, it creates a blind spot. It assumes the planning team has asked all appropriate questions and provided all information the reps need to supply worthwhile packages.

In reality, planners can't possibly know as much about properties or possibilities as reps do. And not every rep is out simply for the largest percentage of the buy they can get. A deeper, informative conversation with reps more often than not results in

unexpected ideas or solutions in using properties that planners may not have realized were possible.

Another idea is to submit requests to properties that seem odd for the plan and engage those reps in conversation. Because their perspective is so different, surprising insights can come from those conversations.

- Buying or partnering with other organizations may not be a responsibility of most planners, but more senior media people may have a call in facilitating these types of higher-order relationships. There are many times when senior people are faced with challenging projects or workloads and are unsure of how to meet the challenge with the current staff.

Buying a small organization with needed skills and assets or partnering with someone for the short-term may be exactly the solution for the situation. If practical, it will certainly yield results by exposing the planning team to others with different skills and perspective.

Growth, however, does not occur simply because we work with or are exposed to the skills, knowledge and perspective of others. In order to truly grow, we must learn and understand the skills, knowledge and perspective. Sometimes that's a more difficult proposition than we realize. We'll dive into that subject next month.

Mark Dominiak is principal strategist of marketing, communication and context for Insight Garden.

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