

Pearls of Leadership Wisdom: The Waiting Game

Not long ago I attended a development committee meeting for the Iowa State University Foundation. ISU had just announced a new president and its upcoming planned transition for that role. The whole ISU campus would be “waiting” a few months for its new leader. I was worried that in the meeting I would hear something like, “Well, we can’t start raising money for this initiative because we don’t know the new president’s priorities.” I was pleased when I heard nothing of the sort.

It is refreshing to see an organization not sitting on its status quo. It’s also amazing to see how organizations that aspire to soar like eagles can often act like lame ducks; “We can’t hire a new VP of HR until our CEO is in place.” Really? If the organization needs something done, then do it! The cost of fixing a mistake is usually less than the cost of a wasted opportunity. Great leaders don’t let waiting for something else to happen impede their actions. In times of transition or just in general, make a decision and forge ahead.

Ideas for Action

You’ll find textbooks filled with examples of go-slow business decisions that later proved grossly incorrect. For example, there’s the record producer who refused to represent the Beatles, stating, “four-piece groups with guitars particularly are finished.” Or the head of now-defunct Wang computers, on the prospect of personal computers: “The PC is the stupidest thing I ever heard of.”

The commonality in such decisions is risk avoidance – the fear of the unknown. Yet just as often, we hear of successful leaders who made bold and ultimately correct decisions, without hesitation. Steve Jobs at Apple, Jack Welch at GE. Once they had some data, they did not spend months agonizing over choices.

Leadership or organizational transitions aren’t a time for agonizing or for waiting. Yet it is so seductive to take that approach. It feels better, it’s less risky, and it *seems* logical. What our minds don’t



tend to process is the real cost of the lost opportunities. Times of transition are opportunities. Just think: as there are more and more leadership transitions and other changes in organizations, your ability to act – despite the pull to wait – will be in high demand.

What transitions are happening now in your organization – either in leadership, structure, or strategy? What are you doing to get in front of those transitions? When have you ever heard the words, “We need to wait until . . .”? Ask yourself what the costs of waiting might be –those costs should be as visible as the feared costs of acting now.

Armed with background like this about transition or change, you may wish to reach out to others to help you think through choices. For example, with your team, identify what kind of phantom barriers or obstacles you allow to get in the way of taking action. When do you need to ask the question, “Why not now; why wait?” Or on the other side, when do you need to go slow (do it right) in order to go faster later?

Above all, trust in yourself. More often than not, you will make great choices. Shortly before his death, Jobs advised Apple employees to never make decisions based on what he would do. “Just do what’s right,” he said.

For more Pearls of Leadership Wisdom, [visit here](#).