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No one wants to lose. That’s true whether you’re talking about the Super Bowl, a friendly basketball game with the neighbors, or a footrace between eight-year-olds. Yes, the desire to win is embedded in the human psyche. So why is it that in the business world the “win or (almost) die trying” principle seems to falter? Why do so many talented, well-led teams, enterprises, and organizations—many of them with clear, reasonable goals—fail to win victories that should have been easily within their grasps?

It’s because they’ve been infected with a disease I call “failing elegantly.”

Failing elegantly is a very sophisticated and veiled set of coping behaviors by individuals, the purpose of which is to avoid the oncoming train of embarrassment when the cover comes off the lousy results that we’d prefer no one ever see. In other words, it’s a fancy way to lose.

Essentially, this debilitating syndrome sets in when people stop believing they can be successful and start devoting their energy to how best to lose.

There is no obvious moment when the danger of failure comes riding in on a pale horse. But there is that moment, and everyone can feel it, when a project or the commitment to the promised results enters the risk zone—when challenges arise and there are no clear answers or remedies. It is precisely at this fork in the road—when egos and reputations get shaky—that leaders must recognize the signs of an impending crisis of confidence and intervene with specific messages and actions aimed at getting everyone back into the winner’s mindset.

The driving elements of failing elegantly are 1) having a sophisticated explanation for the loss, and 2) making sure we appear to have tried everything in our power to avoid this unwanted outcome. But what this mentality forgets is the following harsh reality: There are no style points for second place.

Read on for a few leadership mistakes that put your team in danger of failing elegantly—along with some remedies to get them back into the winner’s mindset.

**Setting impossible goals.** Leading the goal-setting process to arrive at objectives that are perfectly sized is very tricky work, but this effort has never been more important to success than it is in today’s geographically dispersed, virtual organizations. Taskmasters and pacesetting leaders need to learn the fine line between an invigorating challenge and a wholly deflating expectation.

The new *Notes from the Chair* is not different, in that it is designed to provide information and information is important. I will use this in-house publication to provide winning tips and best practices so we can all be prepared to gain that next opportunity. I welcome you input and thoughts, so let’s get engaged and make it happen!

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# Are You Failing Elegantly?

By John Hamm

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Notes from the Chair

 

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While top performers are inspired by “stretch” goals that seem slightly out of their reach, smart team members will not waste their time training for a “three-minute mile.” Goals that are clearly beyond any reasonable confidence of achievement are worse than easy goals—they actually disengage your team’s energy. The predictable and natural response is “Why bother?”

**Letting people get pseudo-wins by “majoring in the minors.”** Very talented people can and do lose focus on the critical path problems that must be solved to transform an idea into reality. Those are often the knottiest problems, and sometimes we resist them for a period of time, preferring to create some satisfying momentum on simpler tasks, or ones that are simply more fun.

Leaders must develop an eye and ear for this weakness—and must try to listen for it in every conversation and look for it in every ops review. They must relentlessly redirect energy to the hard problems, realizing that it is human nature to drift from the tough stuff in favor of more emotionally fulfilling and easier project modules.

**Tolerating “The dog ate my homework” and other common excuses.** In an organization, too much tolerance can be a dangerous notion, mainly because without a clear line in the sand defining

acceptable and unacceptable, a blurred line between success and failure follows. When you’re failing elegantly, for example, you tolerate “The dog ate my homework” and other classic excuses. Massive amounts of energy are poured into sophisticated justifications and rationalizations for certain courses of action, and there is veiled blame for everything outside the team’s control.

What you want, and what the winner’s mindset demands, are insightful explanations for the gap between expected and actual performance. These are informed guesses—as informed and objective as they can be, untainted by the effort expended in dodging responsibility. There is tolerance of the simple fact that we don’t have control over every variable in the game, so at times—through either forces outside our influence or simply not having run our best play—the results are not as we wish.

“Don’t just try, try with effort and just do it.”



The essence of what we do

**Allowing sloppiness and imprecision.** The nice guy in you wants to avoid the perception of being a hardcore hard-ass and will politely look the other way, or catalog it away with some good-natured humor, allowing a corner to be cut, a report to be incomplete, or some shoddy work to pass as acceptable.

Leaders want to be good people, and they want to show others that they have the wisdom to accept human frailty. So they allow themselves to tolerate a little sloppiness here and a little imprecision there in their subordinates’ work. But high reliability organizations never allow sloppiness, because they know it equals death. Unusually excellent leaders have a zero tolerance policy for sloppiness.

**Encouraging “editorialized” data.** One of the most pernicious points where failure can take hold is in the feedback process. Leaders, being eternal optimists and enthusiasts, also have a dangerous tendency to signal, often unconsciously, their dislike of bad news, their inner revulsion toward failure. When that happens—especially when that leader hasn’t regularly established an absolute demand for accurate, objective data—subordinates will begin to shape and color the data to meet the leader’s hopeful expectations and emotional needs, rather than the leader’s intellectual needs.

Unusually excellent leaders demand that performance feedback data be delivered promptly and be uncolored, objective, plentiful, and robust. This data is used to figure out what is working and what isn’t, so that corrections to course and speed can be made.

One CEO who was constantly entertaining requests from his sales force for changes to the company’s product line—change orders—in response to “customer requests.” In this case very few of these requested changes, which came at great expense in engineering time and cost, resulted in orders from the people who had passionately argued the case. Instead of getting upset about it, the CEO simply asked that the team begin to track the percentage of change orders resulting in sales orders, and—what do you know?—this costly practice came to a screeching halt as soon as the sales force knew their bosses were looking at this data, by salesperson, every month.

Measuring what matters is perhaps the very highest use of leadership authority in leading the domain of execution. Once the plan is set, the resources and funding are committed, and the action starts, there is mostly just feedback and response to the unknowns of the battle to be managed. The one thing you must have, to make the real-time course corrections that will inevitably be required, is good data. Invest in the design and the machinery required to gather, analyze, and present the data you need—quickly, accurately, and easily.

**Allowing an absolute commitment to winning to slip.** A tolerance for excuses, corrupt data that compromises strategy, and a distorted view of what is really happening “out there” is akin to boiling a frog one degree at a time. The frog can’t tell how hot the water has gotten until it is dead. But if you put all these factors together and add the heightened sense of urgency that always characterizes the execution phase, you’ll have plenty of the necessary ingredients in place for systematic failure. The key factor is the resignation and rationalization that



 

# Adding Value: Social Media - 9 Rules to Help Your Manufacturing Supplier Chain Partner

occurs when we conclude that winning seems out of reach.

These are dark moments for any team. And yet, we all know that we should leave it all on the field and, as the saying goes, “win or die trying.” But when you’ve already begun to distance yourself from your absolute commitment to winning, you start blaming everything and everyone. The fact that many people see what’s happening and hold the behavior in contempt often proves to be an effective vaccine against the contagion spreading.

Passive acceptance of failure, and the rationalization that always goes with it, is a cancer that can begin anywhere in the organization, then metastasize to every office, including your own. You can prevent it by setting clear and precise standards of behavior for everyone on the team, as well as clear consequences for the violation of those standards. And you can control it through continuous and open communication with every member of your team.

**About the Author:**

John Hamm is author of Unusually Excellent: The Necessary Nine Skills Required for the Practice of Great Leadership. Hamm has also been a CEO, a board member at over thirty companies, and a CEO adviser and executive coach to senior leaders at companies such as Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, and McAfee. John teaches leadership at the Leavey School of Business at Santa Clara University.

“The future of business is now and it looks very different from the past.”

It’s not that I am at the forefront of the Social Media frenzy. I am aware and I know some of you are as well. Some of you are using it for your personal enjoyment, others for the business. It has it’s place in both areas. It is happening at a speed faster than the most skilled could have imagined. However, business today is being made more efficient and productive because of social media. Our industry is “old school” and while many manufacturers have been brought into the 21st century kicking and screaming, it is those who have embraced technology that are the clear winners.

We at World Pac paper cannot compete in today’s marketplace without being able to, and having the capability to, offer our customers the latest technology in managing their business. Social Media is an offshoot of that technology. I would not be out of place to say that Social Media are confusing and deceptive to manufacturers. Keeping up with the evolving and emerging communications and Social Media channels today is a daunting task. So, why not help where we can help? Our supply chain partners manufacture the goods we provide our customers. We at World Pac Paper are in the service business and work hard to add value by helping our customers and supply chain partners where ever we see an opportunity. This subject falls in the Communications & Marketing category and it is the touchstone of all business.

This, like most things, is a journey. It takes commitment and below are 9 simple rules to keep you and your manufacturer focused and heartburn free along the journey.

1. **Social Media are about sharing of and access to information** – about your company, what you can do, what you’ve done, and what you know.

The game of selling is very similar to the game of life. We can take our youth and much of our adult life preparing for the chance to act. Preparedness is important. Preparedness without practical experience can result in wasted time and energy. It can also be expensive or life threatening.

There are those who have the, seeming, luxury of staying put in one job, at one company, for their entire career. Sadly, those days are gone for most. These challenging economic times have created a boom for the creative and energy-driven

By E.L. Smith

# You’re It, now What?

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1. **Procial Media are enabling ‘tribes’** to form around technology, industry and professional interests. Join the tribes that attract your audience and participate.
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3. **Procial Media will become your customers’ new receptionist, on steroids** – connecting customers & prospects with operations points in your organization. Are the people interested in you getting a dial tone when they look for help through these channels? A voice mail? Or are they getting a real, knowledgeable person in your business?

So, does any of this make sense to you? Are you skeptical? Have questions? I sure hope you do. Or maybe you have other suggestions for small or mid-sized manufacturers as they set off on the road to a new chapter for their businesses? Let’s add that World Pac Paper Value Add where and when it is necessary and appropriate.

1. led are here for the long-[**Procial Media**](http://ajsweatt.com/can-procial-networks-energize-smms/) – Social Media used by and for professionals – have tipped the **control of the conversation and research cycles further toward the customer** –your customers and prospects are now connecting with each other frequently & easily, often without your help or knowledge. Embrace this reality, listen, and get involved in the conversation.
2. **Social Media are not a fad** and there is great value in adopting the correct strategies for your business. Facebook and Twitter may fade away, but the tools and the behaviors they’ve enab run.
3. **Procial Media aren’t a position in your company**. They are a skill. Nearly every outward facing group and person in your organization should learn and use these tools to monitor and communicate with your customers, prospects and markets. These channels are becoming how your customers will look to connect with your company. Spread the wealth, to make the wealth.
4. **Use Procial Media to establish yourself as a customer and industry advocate**. If all you talk about is your company, your products or your services, you’re leaving money on the table. Try to be a little bit interesting.
5. **Not all Social Media platforms are of value to your core businesses**. Speak to people when they’re in the professional mindset you want, through the channels that your audience uses when they’re in that condition. Ask yourself – “What are people DOING when they interact in or engage this platform?” and choose where to participate only where everyone benefits. Engineers and purchasing agents at Boeing don’t like to be poked and they don’t play Farmville, and I don’t want to hear about your shop while I’m downloading music.

Selling for World Pac Paper provides the best of all worlds to a salesperson. A company with the financial strength and reputation to close the deal (large and small), a plethora of products, an available team of experts to assist, a support staff ready to facilitate what you need, when you need it and the creative and open minded philosophy of “it can be done!”

Now that you’re it and armed with the tools to make something happen what are you going to do?

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Getting on the road to success

 

It was far too easy to become complacent and to “get away” with doing the bare minimum. Doing busy, the “easy way” with old friends and not stretching to find new prospects and build new relationships was the staple for many in sales in the past. By past, I include the recent past as well.

Today, there is a wide open opportunity to build as big and earn as much as you are able. The operative words are “as you are able.” Do you know your own reach? Have you stretched yourself to Dream Big? Have you become empowered or bewildered by this new business world? Everyone working with World Pac Paper is experienced. While some of the products and solutions offered by World Pac Paper may not be in your basket of experiences, they are there for you to sell. Our team approach enables each sales person at World Pac Paper to learn new products and industries, while assisting to ‘close the deal.’

Selling does require a lot of preparation. You’ve heard the saying “I’d rather be lucky than smart,” well I’ll take luck as it comes, but I’d rather be smart and prepared for any contingency. You have each heard me say, “just do what you do and have done your entire career, sell.”