

thought for the week – risk

“Risk” is defined as “a chance of injury damage or loss, a dangerous chance, or a hazard”. Life is full of risks, and they are never more prevalent than when we are moving forward. In fact, an element of risk is necessary in order to move forward. All of us have seen a toddler beginning to walk haven’t we? Usually, the process begins with the child standing up with the help of a coffee table or a chair. Eventually the child begins to navigate around the furniture, and at some point steps out from the security of that solid object and begins to walk without assistance. Their progress begins haltingly, under the watchful eye of doting parents. After a fall or two, they begin to get their land legs and independence. Such is the beginning of a lifetime of encountering risk.

It has been said, when it comes to risk, that the difference between a managing and a leading is that a leader views risk as opportunity, and a manager is more alert to the risk as danger. Which is right – the leader? The manager? Well, actually, both.

Leaders are correct to remind their teams that setting organizational goals and moving towards them entails some element of risk. It simply cannot be avoided. Their gift, to the organization or company is that they see a preferred future so bright that they are willing to take risks – sometimes big risks to get there. They are creators of forward momentum. During the journey, they regularly exemplify the courage and resilience to inspire the rest of the team to brilliant performance. The down-side of leaders however, is their tendency to minimize risk—even to the point of denying it, which (according to Jim Collins) is characteristic of many failed organizations.

In so far as managers have been tasked with the role of caring for the assets, the future and the reputation of the organization, their natural inclination is to avoid risk at all possible costs. Sometimes they view their role as one of keeping ambitious leaders from “boldly going where no man has gone before.” However, their greatest contribution to the process of moving into the future is to help manage risk, not eliminate it. Theirs is the role to bring the right data to the table, to ask the right questions, and create the effective infrastructure to accomplish the organization’s goals. While the leader is cheering the team on, the manager is in the pit, changing the tires, and filling the tank with gas for the next few laps around the track.

A character in the Old Testament exemplifies this balance between leading and managing when it comes to risk is Caleb. After the account of Israel’s conquest of Canaan in the book of Joshua, Caleb goes to Joshua (in chapter 14) and requests the unconquered hill country of Hebron for his own. While he is undoubtedly amazed at this 85 year old visionary, Joshua grants the request. Having counted the cost, not only does Caleb inspire his troops to action, but he also rolls up his sleeves and does everything possible to help them manage the challenges, and successfully achieve the goal. What an example and legacy!

“There are risks and costs to a program of action –but they are far less than the long-range risks of comfortable inaction.” (J.F. Kennedy)

Have a great week:

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