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Why does it sound like I need a cure for anecdotes, as in those used for case study examples, stories, and b-school breakthroughs? Well, my job requires that I read a lot, which I generally enjoy. But lately I have become, let's say, tired of reading the same old stories of how Company A implemented new Business Method X and was successful and how Company B, who didn't, still wallows in business purgatory.

Also, everybody who writes an article, a book, or a white paper uses the same companies as their "prime" examples. I read lots of essays where Southwest and FedEx are cited as examples of success or where HP should be copied for their brilliant adoption of Business Method Y. I read about a group of companies that won the Malcolm Baldrige award or successfully implemented ISO-9000 only to find some of them are experiencing, seemingly, contradictory results.

OK. OK. I concede anecdotes serve a purpose. They sometimes provide the reader with a picture of how a new business methodology or a best practices process can be applied, some of the pratfalls that can be encountered, and provide insight to some of the political realities that a "better than sliced bread" system conjures up (e.g. "it wasn't invented here" or "our culture is different, that's not how we do things"). Not to mention that people like to hear stories that let them know that they are not alone on the rocky road to business success.

But the "you, too, can do this" implications just nag at me. I've always thought that the actions and operations of a successful business venture mentioned in anecdotes was good news for the company which implemented them but not necessarily good news for all others.

That's because I know this: The successes and failures mentioned in anecdotes was based on what the chronicled company *knew* about *their* businesses, where they wanted to go, their focus, and a number of operational and knowledge factors that were assessed for and discovered before new business method X or Y was "invented." That is, before they were able to operate distinctively enough to be mentioned in an anecdote. It's hard work to get this knowledge and I know the work can't be short-circuited by other firms in order to get similar results.

The successes mentioned in anecdotes came to life because the companies knew they had the ability - *in light of their enterprise knowledge* - to define the new method and reap its value and because they prepared their stakeholders for its acceptance. If they had not been ready - unable to convince their employees that new solutions were needed - new concepts would have gone by the wayside. The bottom line is that they knew themselves well. The failures mentioned are due to just the opposite: the companies did not know themselves well.

If successful companies stopped being successful, it's because they lost or stopped gaining enterprise knowledge, they lost focus, or they changed - intentionally or unintentionally - where they wanted to go without "knowing themselves" first. Maybe they were just trying things mentioned in other companies' anecdotes because they wanted to get on the "business method du jour" bandwagon instead of understanding why they needed the method and how it fit their goals. In other words, they went ahead without fully understanding their competitive and value position status.

So what's the anecdote antidote?

Before you "experiment" with some "new to you" business method – yours or someone else's – search your company for its own anecdotes. It's your stories of success and failure, not someone else's, that become the basis for need and, eventually, acceptance of something new. And it's these anecdotes that really shape the ideas that guide your future.

How do you get anecdotes? It's best done through the periodic *assessing* – across the board – of your business activities, customers, and operations to get a full understanding of your enterprise's competitive capabilities. By asking the right questions of the right people about the right business assets and projects, you can discover what's working, what isn't working and why to help you determine how well your business components fit into your future actions.

In order to apply methods to problems, you have to have a clear understanding of which issues are real and which ones are just random operational glitches. They may escape your notice if you don't baseline your knowledge and perform regular comparisons. This knowledge will help prepare your company for the decision to use either the business methods produced from industry wide anecdotes or to develop your own, possibly new, processes.

Keep in mind, these assessments may point out that the actions reaped from your own success stories of past performance may not necessarily be good enough to implement for your company's new strategic objectives. Simply put, past performance does not predict future performance!

Also, consider this: If your company *does* develop an innovative way of doing business, remember, somebody has to be successful first, and you may not have the comfort of knowing that someone else failed first. The title of "leader" belongs to the first company to successfully implement a breakthrough methodology.

Which means that if your business utilizes someone else's methods, the best your company can be is a follower, trying to catch up to that "edge" the leader now has. If you read or heard of an anecdote about the successful implementation of a new method, then implementing it probably relegates your company to no better than second place competitively (if that were the only competitive factor involved) – unless you add some kind of uniqueness to the method.

So is it better to use someone else's method or to develop your own? That depends on the outcome of an enterprise wide assessment of your competitive situation and the guidance it brings to the table. Regardless of whether you want to use someone else's or develop your own, you need to follow this advice on doing assessments so you can discover the circumstances that will help increase your success in choosing "new method" – theirs or yours – experiments and predicting their outcomes.

Why? You only want your stories to become anecdotal if they have happy endings.