



Leveraging the Outsider: New Solutions to Old Problems

Few people would argue that addressing the challenges face this nation today – a recessive and stalled economy; aging and crumbling infrastructure; declining health and increasing health care costs; waning educational and manufacturing competitiveness; and progressive moral breakdown – requires new thinking, novel approaches, and innovative strategies.

To paraphrase a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

But how do organizations ensure that they develop new approaches to old problems, modern solutions to age-old challenges, and more importantly, new strategies to overcome solutions they have yet to face, or needs they have yet to even identify?

People, of course, are the most important asset to finding these answers. But which people are best to face today's challenges? Those who are knowledgeable of the issue? Those who have been working (or at least facing) the challenge for some time? Or those who are new to the problem, who face the issue for the first time, perhaps with limited knowledge or understanding?

There is clear value to the "insider." The insider often has a good grasp of where things are, of who matters, of what is hidden in closets and under rocks, of where the traps may lie. The insider often has demonstrated experience or at least knowledge of what the situation is and how we got here. And the insider often has demonstrated lasting power. All invaluable to an enterprise, a university, a city, a state, as it tries to figure out how to move forward, to ensure its continuing growth, excellence, and value.

However, the "outsider," often with more limited information, generally unburdened by all the details of an organization's past, by the minutiae of past lives, is a critical asset to facing the future. And most importantly to finding solutions to old (and new) problems.

Outsiders bring in fresh, eager eyes, new perspectives, new ideas, new experiences, new approaches, new hope. And best of all – outsiders don't know it can't be done. They just say, "why not?"

The danger of overreliance on insider knowledge, or thinking that insider knowledge is always superior to knowledge possessed outside the organization is that it can lead to stagnation and missed opportunities. No one today would consider Apple a staid company, but that is what it was in the early 1990s when management lived in an insular world.

It is important to ensure that the outsiders brought into an organization are fully informed, that they are protected, that they know where the pitfalls are, and where the bodies are buried. But it is equally important to tell them: "This is your challenge. Go and find a solution." Because if the goal is a good one, then their job is to find a way to help the organization get there.

There is great value to understanding an organization's history, the "How we got here." For the path to the future is guided (but not determined) by the past. But it is also critical to value the most important outsider asset: Novel thought.



Organizations work hard to recruit the best and brightest. Often the communities who universities and health systems serve – patients, faculty, scientists, students and the public work hard to assimilate outsiders as rapidly as possible, as if to protect them from harm. This is considered a good thing. A friendly thing. A hospitable thing.

However, it is important to not assimilate them too quickly and too completely – otherwise organizations will begin to lose the value of their investment. Organizations do not hire leaders and experts (generally) to determine that current problems are insolvable, that past failures will continue, and that there is no hope. Organizations hire them to innovate, and it is incumbent to not automatically discount their ideas once they become insiders.

To do that would be – to use another example from the business world – Xerox, circa 1970s. While the company's management was focused on benchmarking the activities of its competitors, it failed to commercialize the discoveries of its own researchers, whose technologies included the Ethernet, the mouse and word processing software. All of those were profitably developed by other companies and are still used today.

Clearly, maximizing the value of both recruitments and leadership is simply good business. And there are two ways that organizations can do this:

First, it is fine to tell new leaders about the successes – and failures – that transpired before their arrival. They need to know. But do not tell them what can't be done. Their job is to figure out a way to get it done. That's why they are here.

Secondly, when one is too close to a problem that is considered insurmountable, always be sure to ask yourself, "Am I assuming this can't be fixed, because of what I believe? Should I get a fresh pair of eyes to look at this?" Because it may be possible that an outsider's perspective can find the way.

Institutions and organizations work hard to attract new leaders to ensure that they grow to provide greater value and impact to their stakeholders. Some of these professionals are recruited from outside the immediate community, some were local once and are now returning, and others who have been with the institution a while are assuming completely new roles in our midst.

And so, as organizations develop these new leaders, remember to recognize that one of their principal values, and an institutional asset, is their role (transient as it may be) as an "outsider." Embrace, foster and support their novel perspectives, thoughts, and solutions.

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