Technology vs. Critical Thinking

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Introduction

In the last few articles we discussed maintaining a leadership perspective in today's seemingly chaotic and partisan world. We addressed how a leader must maintain focus on the goals of the organization and not become involved in political or hot button topics in the workplace, hence keeping employees focused on the organization. In this article we explore aspects of our chaotic world and how the things we believe are driving changes are separating us from critical thinking about topics and issues facing leaders in today's world. We are becoming, unfortunately, a reactive world in our current environment, not a thinking world.

We specifically discuss technology in the context of leadership. How those technology related phenomenon we face and experience daily constitute leadership challenges and how 'things' (reactive responses) can quickly get out of control.

Where Were We?

First, looking back several decades, our form of information gathering once consisted of daily newspapers, libraries and magazines. They were items we could hold in our hands. Who would ever question Walter Cronkite, the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, or Life and Time magazines? These informational and news media were credible, tangible and mainstream. People accepted that the Times, Tribune, Washington Post, and Philadelphia Inquirer were providing accurate and unbiased news. There was certainly some bias, but the facts were verified and the sources vetted. There were also counter culture rags such as the National Enquirer and other magazines, but that's exactly what they wanted to be, and readers knew what they were reading. When we communicated it was via telephone, written letters, or face to face. Letters were delivered as addressed via the US Postal Service or Western Union or other seemingly credible couriers.

The point here is for the most part and for the majority of citizens, our sources of information and news carried a level of credibility. Reporters were personally responsible for the content and authenticity of their stories. News agencies prided themselves in protecting their sources and vetting their information by having multiple sources before publishing. The movie 'All the President's Men' is a good example of this. To wit, the following exchange:

> Ben Bradlee : Bernstein, are you sure on this story?
> Carl Bernstein : Absolutely.
> Ben Bradlee : Woodward?
> Bob Woodward : I'm sure.
> Ben Bradlee : I'm not. It still seems thin.
> Howard Simons : Get another source.

Communication is a huge issue. When people communicated, they did so, via letters or handwritten memoranda, over the telephone, and, of course, face-to-face. If there was an interpersonal issue, it was confronted with some level of dignity (I know you think we are in never-never land) either in writing or verbal communication. By today's standards all of this seems very inefficient, time consuming and archaic. But several things were happening. With the inefficiencies came time, and with time came perspective, and perspective tended to minimize reactivity. Plus it gave people time to ponder and think. And think critically about what they just

read or heard. On flip side it did cause a level of angst to those who prefer to resolve things quickly. We certain have to acknowledge that. All in all, while we were slow, the pace allowed for time for pondering and thinking. We may not have known it as critical thinking, but that was what we were doing – giving thought and not just accepting the written word or face value of a conversation.

Where Are We Now?

Now jump ahead 40 to 50 years. Technology articles and writings warned about both the sheer volume of information, and the speed at which it would arrive, but we don't really believe that those making the warnings, thought it would go both as quickly as it did and in so many various directions. Let's take email to start. We all love email. A godsend to efficiency, right? No more running to the post office, no more stamps to buy, no more waiting for responses. It all happens instantaneously. We also respond instantaneously with little to no time to ponder content.

Let's look at a scenario: Your boss sees a report on the internet that says your biggest customer is going to switch to a different supplier because you have not met their needs. The boss sends you an email demanding an immediate response as to why the customer is leaving your company and what you can do to change that. You forward this email to all your department heads, demanding to know immediately what they have done to upset the customer. Everyone is in a panic and running around, trying to find out what happened and looking for someone or department to blame. Was the original report accurate? Our world of instantaneous information throws people into chaos too often. Did anyone think to question the original source? Did anyone take the time to call the customer to get the facts? Things deteriorate rapidly and people react and blame each other for something that may not be accurate. Far-fetched? We think not.

We also believe in addressing internal problems/issues at the lowest level possible within an organization. But with email this concept is challenged because it is so easy to forward 'cc' and 'bcc' others. Hence a minor issue can escalate to levels within the organization unnecessarily. We refer to that as "running it up the flag pole." Once the escalation starts it can snowball, creating both direct and indirect disruption to an organization for no substantive reason.

The issue here is that emails propagate rapidly, with little knowledge of where they are going or where they went. With the email, there are no body language or intonation cues, just words on a screen with no indication of their accuracy or of the originator's motive. And, without the opportunity to see the person, a level of emboldening occurs. The initiator of the email may feel emboldened to be more forceful or even abusive. The result is a communication that becomes augmented as it is distributed. "See what he said about your department?" as a subject line. Whoa there, let's not get too worked up here. It's a simple fix but the issue was run up and down the flagpole stirring the pot all along the way. So where's the efficiency? Look at all that's left in the wake of this upset. How much time has been spent in a reactive or even crisis management role? Nobody in this scenario really interacted with another person on a personal basis; they exercised their muscle via email from behind a computer screen. How great is this?

Now back to information and news. Take social media, emboldened users, lack of vetting, unknown sources of content, and exceptionally rapid and bold promulgation of content. How dangerous is this combination? Overlay reactivity and a lack of critical thinking, and things can go south really quickly. We have become attuned to having instant information. Even though we know it's not the case, we still fall under the spell of "it's on the internet so it must be true." The good news is that the internet gives us instant information. The bad news is that the internet gives us instant information with no reality or sanity checks. There are no internet police (plus our constitution guarantees freedom of speech), so anyone can write anything and do so anonymously. Policing the internet and the validity of content falls to the reader, and that reader must critically think about what they read. What is the source? Who is the author? What is their credibility? What is their intent? Is this content based in fact or in sensationalism? It is so easy and convenient to accept posted content without giving it serious thought, but too often you do so at great risk to yourself and to any others that you involve in that content.

A similar phenomenon is selecting the content one wants to believe in. Because of technology, we have choices (again the good and the bad). We believe in balance, but when an individual chooses the sources that they want to believe without any counterbalancing

information, we characterize this as severely limiting one's ability to critically think, fostering even more reactivity.

Conclusion

The proliferation of inaccurate and questionable content posted on the internet or promulgated via social media and technology-based communication tools constantly dismays us. It impacts people in their business and personal lives. Today's life style is hectic for many of us, such that we don't take time to critically think about what we are reading. Another perspective is those who are not so busy, and spend inordinate amounts of time in front of a computer screen feeding on content that is compatible with their perspective but lacking balance. Human nature takes the expedient path, accepting things without taking time to stop, think and ponder information. It is common knowledge, and we probably can all agree there is misinformation posted on the internet. Author Bernard Cornwell in his The Last Kingdom books stated so accurately, "There is no cause so hopeless, no creed so mad, no idea so ludicrous that it will not attract some believers."

Whether in your business or personal life, take time to evaluate content received via email or the internet and how that content impacts you. Try not to fall into the trap of just communicating via email and allow face to face or telephone communications to fall by the wayside. Technology continues to have a huge positive and negative impact on our lives, so temper your interactions and content with critical thinking. Seek balance and attempt to be as objective as possible.

Epilogue

It's not all bad, and we certainly believe our world today, in so many respects, is so much better than what many nostalgics believe, and here's an example. The term is Crowd Sourced Wisdom. A simple example of internet/technology stimulating constructive interactions and creative thinking is the foodie community. This example does not relate to leadership, but is indicative of how technology and people interact in a constructive context. Foodies are a very active group of people, and this time of year, food is front and center in most of our minds. Magazines like Bon Appetite and many others all print their take on a Thanksgiving dinner menu. In particular, Bon Appetite's menu included a unique approach to Thanksgiving stuffing, a "Stuffing Biscuit." The ingredients were interesting and the concept even more interesting. With the print version of the magazine we would make the biscuits and if we liked or didn't like them, the only people who would know would be our family and guests. Well, for the digital version people can comment, and while I dive head first into the menu, there are people who give an item a trial run. Apparently there are quite a few who do this. The "Crowd" seemed to think the recipe was a bit too heavy on herbs. They made their comments quite well known. So we see this phenomenon as "Crowd Source Wisdom." We are going to follow the crowd on this one and take their suggestions. Before technology as we know it today this probably would not occur. A simple example of how interested people can offer a constructive dialogue on a topic they are seemingly passionate about to the benefit of others. Enjoy your biscuits, and if you want the adjusted recipe let us know.

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