


You Can't Look Forward Until You Look Back

By Libby Wagner



I love this time of year in business, even though I confess I'm not always successful at resisting the frantic pace of end-of-year activities along with the upcoming holiday season.

I love it because I'm a big fan of reinvention, and even though I believe in and encourage leaders to reinvent at any time of year, there are some natural rhythms to December that allow us to participate in the sort of reflection and projection the emerging year can bring.

There is something special about the countdown to the end, the hopeful look toward the future.

Don't let this opportunity go by for you this year to truly take time to reflect upon 2010 and what you intend the New Year to bring.

Often, in my work with executive coaching clients, I urge them to carve out designated time for the strategic work that only they can do, and to treat it as sacred. I'd ask myself at least these courageous questions:

- 1** What were our top three successes this year? What are the things we can do to capitalize on those successes?
- 2** What were our top three failures? What did we learn, and what will we definitely not do again?
- 3** If I could envision anything for our business for next year, without any obstacles or "yeah, buts," what would that be?
- 4** What sort of culture or environment would we need to create or cultivate to make the answer to Question 3 happen?

Certainly, there are benefits to having this discussion with your leadership team, or even with the overall company itself, but the leader's job, for sure, is to do this work so that you can lead from the front as you move forward to the next, grand adventure.

Imagine that your company is like a garden. It's one which you'd like to grow, see flourish, and bear fruit. In that context, your cultivation of the right environment and conditions is what your culture can do to support the business results you want.

And frankly, that snazzy new tractor you're thinking about buying

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for the harvest will be a waste of money if you don't have rich soil, the right seeds, careful care and maintenance, and someone to bring the harvest in.

The right environment and conditions equates to your organizational culture. Are you creating the sort of place where you can get the results you want? Culture matters, and you've got one: it's either accidental or intentional.

My suggestion is to evaluate and purposefully cultivate a Profit Culture—an environment in which people work together to create positive outcomes for their organizations or groups.

A Profit Culture is a culture of abundance: there is more than enough! More than enough to go around, more than enough to do the good work you're doing, more than enough to grow, more than enough to invest in the future, more than enough to reap benefits and rewards.

In for-profit businesses such as yours (because a non-profit business can also have a Profit Culture!), your bottom line profit is only one indicator of your culture, and only one indicator of whether, as you look toward the future, you will be able to sustain your direction and/or develop resilience.

The problem with the bottom line is that it's at the bottom! There are many things that have to happen in that garden before you can bring the harvest home.

The old adage is true: You will reap what you sow.

How can you tell if you have a Profit Culture? In addition to your bottom line being in the black, you would also see evidence of the following:

- A sense of hope, excitement or passion about the organization's purpose or mission
- A sense of positivity, creative problem-solving and shared decision-making
- Creativity and innovation—people's willingness to think "out of the box,"

challenge the status quo and look for ways to raise the bar

■ Resilience in tough times—a sense of determination and conviction that helps people stay focused during tough market changes, leadership shifts and business challenges

■ Loyalty, faith and a sense of "family" commitment to the business or team

■ A sense of helpfulness, generosity and shared responsibility—there's minimal instances of "that's not my job," silo-ing or the blame game

If you had to rate your company or team with 1 as Low and 5 as High, how do you stack up? Where are your areas for growth and development?

And, most importantly, what are you doing about it? What is the vision and plan for how to cultivate that Profit Culture for 2011?

First things first: The most important step you need to take in cultivating a Profit Culture is to begin with you.

Leading well involves gaining clarity and ideas around three key elements: Being, Thinking and Doing.

It's really important not to skip to Doing if you've really not spent some good time on Being and Thinking first.

You want to create alignment among these three elements because that will make you more effective, efficient and less stressful or frustrated, and because it creates congruence.

Congruent leaders—leaders whose values, beliefs and principles form the foundation for their Thinking and Doing—are more effective leaders for the long-term and are those that are able to create committed Profit Cultures.

In order to cultivate the right mind-set for a Profit Culture, you need to examine your language and your thinking. How often in your mind and in your communications are you speaking of lack or scarcity?

How often do you hear yourself saying no or resisting when a simple shift or creative turn can help you examine possibility?

This seems so simple, and it is, but it is a very important and disciplined distinction to get yourself on the right track.

No tool I can offer, no model I can share can overcome a negative, limited mind-set—that trumps the good stuff every time.

Here are some phrases to get you started when you find yourself focusing on the negative:

- "I wonder what that might look like?"
- "If money were no object, how might we do it?"
- "How can we be creative inside the current situation (i.e. budget, constraints, limits, etc.)?"
- "If we could create the best version of this (i.e. proposal, customer interaction, project that's gone wrong, downturn in the market, etc.), what would that look like?"

Notice that all this language contains possibility, the potential for "more than enough."

Begin today: Utilize the four questions at the top to reflect, then look forward and give yourself permission to imagine how a true Profit Culture in your workplace can be the fertile soil for your results!

Have questions about Profit Cultures, defining your Leadership Voice or creating a stronger team? Contact Libby Wagner at 206-906-9203 or libby@libbywagner.com.

Look for more "how to" on Creating and Sustaining a Profit Culture in OFDealer's 2011 February issue.

Check out "Leaders Look Forward and Back" at www.libbywagner.com for some practical suggestions on how to use this reflective time for yourself to plan for next year!