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## **Helping Others**

*I always liked “sharing time.” I guess I still do. It was the most interesting part of our week in kindergarten.*

*Everyone was asked to bring something special to class. Of course, “special” is relative and we would see a wide range of items. Most things were interesting, some things were “Whew, what did you have to do to get one of those?,” and other things were “yawners” (like the girls’ favorite dolls).*

*Each person would spend about five minutes sharing something special about his or her life. It could be something large or small. It could be a thing, a person, an activity, or an event. It didn’t matter.*

*I remember bringing a glass dome to class. When you turned it over pieces of plastic simulated snow falling on a house in the middle of the forest. I’m not sure why I liked it, maybe because it was different. This was really a simple activity, yet we were exposed to something new and different in our world.*

*I found out things about my friends that I had never known before. How about Karen’s butterfly collection-- gosh, some of those butterflies were monsters! I had never seen anything like that before. In fact, I remember feeling scared looking at a butterfly that was the about the size of my dad’s two hands. There was something eerie in the thought of something that gentle, yet that large, landing on me. That night I had a nightmare about a monster butterfly. I was glad there was a pin through that guy!*

*Who would have thought that Norman would have such an extensive collection of baseball cards? That encouraged me to start a collection of my own.*

It is enlightening to take a look at a problem or opportunity from another viewpoint. We tend to get wrapped up in our own little world and don't look beyond our four walls. In the heat of battle, we don't tend to look to the soldier next to us to see the struggles he endures. We plow through situations by ourselves. We think we are the only one with a problem or the only one who has experienced our particular problem.

This is especially true when it comes to eBusiness. There is so much for us to learn and, frankly, few resources from whom to learn. We get a barrage of magazine articles that hit eBusiness from the technical angle, but hardly any resources that provide what we really need. That is like learning to drive based on understanding how the engine operates. While that may be interesting, it hardly places us behind the wheel. It neglects the skills of anticipating another driver's moves or the social skills of letting someone merge into your lane.

The same applies for books that target managers on setting a "top-down" eBusiness strategy, but little applies to the guys in the trenches.

**It starts with our being receptive to helping others.** Being receptive to helping others begins with the right perspective: "We are all in this together."

It is obviously important to work closely with your trading partners and internal service providers. In being receptive to helping others, they recognize they can come to you for assistance. In working with customers, you will have the opportunity to see the world through their eyes and understand their concerns. This gives you a "leg up" on proactively working through their stumbling blocks-- real and perceived. You will be able to monitor their progress and reinforce your message over a period on time.

Helping and training your own employees is also valuable. It increases your customer's base of support. Frequently employees' inexperience will show. They may even be threatened by your efforts to move your company to B2B. So be it. You are in a perfect position to help them understand what is occurring in the world around them.

They may not like what they see coming their way, but they will likely recognize two things: first, it is unavoidable and, second, it is not something you personally are doing "to them." Once they recognize that their company cannot be competitive without B2B, they can begin to see what new role they can play, either inside or outside of their current job or company.

They can personally access the new skills and training they will require to be successful in the future. They might not like the change they may view as being “imposed upon them.” That’s only natural. But they may be able to see a larger and more negative change that is “looming” if their company doesn’t become more competitive. Either way, change is going to have an impact on their lives.

By putting aside our competitive natures, we can sometimes learn a great deal. Some of the best sharing times I have had have been with my competitors. I ran a sub-committee on technical EDI standards for an international trade association, which involved working with representatives from all my major competitors. I talked with them about the issues we were facing, the personalities of the people with whom we were working, the things that I had done that were successful, and the things that had not worked. Initially, they were quite surprised by my comments and how forthright I was in speaking with them. When I met hesitation or outright resistance, I was just persistent in passing along information and the experiences I had had. Counter-intuitive, isn’t it?

Over time, they began sharing their approaches and insights with me and identifying what had worked well for them. Since I was interacting with many competitors and each of them was engaged only with me, we experienced different degrees of success. When I was approaching 85% of my customers fully implemented, they were hitting around 50-60%. For many reasons those were some of the most fun and rewarding times I have had in my business career.

Sharing with others allows us to observe new things or “refresh” our experience. Many times I have had colleagues come to me with a problem. Frequently, they are encountering something I had been through years before. Talking through the problem, listening to their questions, or hearing their concerns reinforces those activities that led to earlier successes.

Contrary to popular belief, you don’t have to know everything to get started. In reality, you only need to know one thing that would help someone else. Sometimes you can just share a recent experience. Other times, you may just want to ask others to share something with you.

**Facilitate learning sessions.** Frequently you can host learning sessions with customers and suppliers. Often you can get software consultants or vendors to discuss

their products and services; they are usually eager to increase exposure. What better way than through their current customers? You need to clearly identify the topic and set expectations, as these are not sales pitches. They may create interest that would lead to a sales opportunity, but that is not the primary focus.

You can establish classroom activities and conduct mini-seminars on a topic of interest to your customers. That can be done in a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere.

I also like to conduct “tea leaf” sessions. In this activity you get people together to reflect on what they are observing in the marketplace and are hearing from their customers. In effect, you set the mood for considering what the future may bring and what needs to be done to prepare. These can also be very helpful in collecting competitive information and in understanding the concerns of others. It can also lead to additional follow-up opportunities, such as seminars, classroom teaching, articles for trade journals, emails and webzines, and webinars.

**Try some writing or “speaking engagements.”** People are always interested in hearing what others have to say. Just share your story-- what you have learned along the way, what you have accomplished and your trials in the process.

Speaking at eBusiness conferences, customer meetings and small, local “events” (such as local eBusiness associations, Rotary International, or Kiwanis clubs) can be rewarding. If you aren’t sure whether speaking is your “cup of tea,” try sitting on panels or interviews.

If you are really uncomfortable with public speaking, then try writing monthly email “blasts” or webzines for a small trade journal in your area of interest. Or volunteer for a phone interview with the editor of an eBusiness magazine that covers topics that interest you. Normally, you can locate the editors’ names and email addresses in magazines or web sites.

There are opportunities at the local, regional, national and international level-- whatever suits your “comfort level,” tastes, and finances. My favorite happens to be international conferences that are mostly “vendor-neutral.” International doesn’t mean having to speak before a cast of thousands. It does mean having different cultures and a wide angle of the business audience.

The old adage “what goes around, comes around” still applies: for better or worse. Make it a better world by sharing your insights and knowledge with others. Give without the anticipation of receiving back and you will be richly rewarded, sometimes in unexpected ways.

*Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value. – Albert Einstein*



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