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If at First You Don't Succeed, Try, Try Again

I remember the local electric company came to school each year to talk about safety around electrical wires. Southern California Edison would make their presentation, provide a safety cartoon booklet (who can forget "Sparky?"), and hand out kits containing materials for making kites. Their timing was perfect, because it always seemed to be windy the day they presented. They would encourage us to think about safety when using kites and to involve our parents in kite-construction.

In hindsight, that was pretty remarkable. Today I cannot imagine a power utility company risking the liability of teaching kids to make a toy that, if misused, could result in injury or death. Obviously our world has changed a bit. In those bygone days, maybe they recognized that I was going to fly a kite whether they taught me the safe way to do so or not. Maybe they were a lot smarter then, smarter than their lawyers are today.

My father helped me make that first "electric company" kite. He also helped me make a kite he always enjoyed flying-- a "box kite" made out of newspaper, string, and pieces of wood. I have loved box kites ever since. They took hours to make and great care was necessary to get the strings in place and the frame square. We worked together gluing the paper and creating notches in the wood for the string.

It was a masterpiece.

He told me to hold the kite while he walked, then ran. He had instructed me to let go of the kite when he yelled. I watched him run. I watched the string tighten. I was admiring the way the kite was capturing the wind when he called for me to let go. Then I watched a piece of the wood snap because I had held on to the kite too long. I watched as he stormed back into our house, disappointed in me.

The next day I apologized to my father. Soon we fixed the box kite and got it soaring in the wind.

We all make mistakes. We all miscalculate and make wrong assumptions. We also observe others (and sometimes maybe ourselves) intentionally or unintentionally blind ourselves to realities we don't choose to admit. It is no different in the business world or in our personal lives.

With eBusiness, it just seems that the other guy's calculation of benefits doesn't quite mirror our own vision of reality or our experience.

One other thing that is typically different about eBusiness is that we rely on others for our own success. That introduces an additional dynamic in achieving, or failing to achieve, success. That potential trading partner with whom you have been working for months and who has been solidly behind your project "all the way", suddenly has his funding evaporate. Or it is technically more difficult than they had thought and they cannot bring the right resources to bear to complete the project. Or their "security people" will not let them pass through your firewall in the way they thought they could. Or whatever.

With eBusiness, this reversal of fortune can happen very quickly.

A third problem with eBusiness is the way we approach our projects. Our inclination is to turn our pilots and prototypes into full-fledged, production applications. Shame on us. A proof of concept is getting the kite ten feet off the ground for ten seconds, not to a hundred feet for an hour. This is the place we make our "break throughs" with customers-- in their thinking and commitment. This is where we prove to management, our trading partners, and, yes, to ourselves as well, that our plans can be made to work.

We need to understand what we expect to learn and ideally determine how we are going to measure our pilots and prototypes. We need to do that first.

Our inclination is to place too much into the "first release." We aim too high with functionality, performance, scale implementations, etc. Shame on us again.

In reality, if something cannot be completed in a 60-to-90 day cycle, it is already too big. Break it down. If it still seems to be too big, it is. The next step is easy! Your first

30-day project is to figure out how you are going to break all your work down into 60-to-90 day projects.

One of my colleagues did a great job breaking down projects into “bite-size chunks” without compromising the design. She recognized the value of getting “something done” while moving the much larger project along. She stayed focused on the final objective and made sure there was alignment to the short-term objective. She continually kept the features that were taken “off the plate” for the current development visible so that, at the appropriate time, it could be reincorporated. Many times this last step is lost. We take out functions or feature in our effort to meet a schedule without understanding how it compromises the overall design. Then it is all too easy to ignore what has been “dropped out” when we move along to the next project. It can also be the Trojan horse in B2B. It can mean the difference between failure and success that we neglect to recognize until it is too late.

Anything bigger than a 60-to-90 day project is too dynamic to create at all, much less create well. The problem is that this runs counter to the way we as business people are configured. We are so anxious to get big things going, we don't recognize when our earnest endeavor is leading down a blind alley.

Fail fast and fail small. Failure is natural. Unfortunately, we are not conditioned for failure. We don't hold commencement ceremonies for those who flunk out of school. (Maybe we should. Actually, they are just commencing early and moving on to their next educational experience.) Instead, we take failure personally. We never plan for it. Our plans call for us to mitigate our risks instead of planning for what we hope to extract out of a failure.

Haven't we all seen organizations struggle just to get started with a project that seems too big? We all have seen projects that seems as if they spent all their time trying to gain traction, not knowing exactly where to begin.

Have you ever read a business case that said, “We don't know enough to be successful, so we plan on this being a complete write off and will be coming back for more money to do it again soon?” I don't think so. We would be handed our hat, if not our head! But in reality that is where we frequently find ourselves in B2B, especially if

we have done a good job with our business and eBusiness strategies. Especially if our plans have stretched our imaginations.

The paradigm we need to move to is one that the best research organizations hit upon: “One of these will work, we are just not sure which one yet!”

Instead of being overly concerned with failure, you want to control failure and learn from it. Extract as much learning as possible from things that don’t work. Find out why the acceptance of your application has been less than stellar. Failing small and failing fast go “hand in hand.” They enable us to pick ourselves up off the mat and get back into the game.

At Kodak, our business units and customers told us that we needed to have order status and carrier tracking. They told us order status was far more important than order entry. We knew that order entry was still important, since our corporate management was driving us hard to take out costs. So we developed both web-based functions.

Our initial experience, however, was that order entry was used far more by customers than order status. Since this is contrary to what we had been told by the business units and key customer contacts would happen, we looked at the process to determine why. We found that as customers did order entry, we were supplying the information that was most important to them both on-line and via a separate e-mail. We were giving them the estimated delivery date for each item. If there were going to be multiple shipments of an item, each delivery quantity and its correlating delivery date was identified. Because of this information, much of the need for order status was taken away. Customers only needed to come to order status to confirm that items were still on schedule or to follow-up should we have late deliveries.

This means our needs assessment failed. But it doesn’t mean we hadn’t done a good job with the needs assessment. Nobody could have told us ahead of time what would have occurred. Customers were being shown order entry and order status at the same time, yet they didn’t catch how their behaviors would have been different. Nobody was jumping up and down saying, “Why don’t you give us just order entry instead?” Their most recent experience with the manual processes had driven them to have in mind one solution, when another solution was better suited for their needs.

Would that have changed the functionality that we would have delivered? Possibly. We might have developed order status in smaller segments of work and accessed each one differently. It certainly would have changed our customer rollout process.

Learn to throw the first waffles out. You learn by doing. Confucius said, "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." We can all relate.

You can get all the consulting you want. You can attend all the classes. You can listen to all the lectures. You can attend all the seminars. You can watch over the shoulders of others. But there is nothing like doing it yourself. It's where the rubber meets the road. It is where you begin to understand. There is nothing like getting your hands on the steering wheel.

I occasionally have the opportunity to help a business unit define its eBusiness strategy. In reality I am not sure there is such a thing as an eBusiness strategy, but most people don't know that early on. There should be a business strategy and the eBusiness components need to support and align with that overarching strategy.

I use a methodology called a "strategy table" to help bring clarity to the effort. The first three steps can be done in either workshops or as preparation work leading up to a workshop. The initial steps lead the business unit leadership through understanding the scope, marketplace, and competition.

The idea is, in a progressive fashion, to most narrowly focus the effort and to do so quickly. With pinpoint precision, we try to decide what the eBusiness effort will and will not entail. That way, the workshop participants have some management direction and basis upon which to proceed. Without that direction, participants can wander in the wilderness for 40 years!

It never ceases to amaze me how businesses hit a "wall of discovery" at about this point. Usually, they have clearly misjudged the opportunity and need to regroup. Or they have misalignment with their business unit or corporate goals. Or they have singled out the effort for a small group (or individual) that hasn't fully represented their senior management's most crisp thinkers.

Almost always, some additional effort is required as a “course correction.” It doesn’t matter how often ahead of time I have preached gaining senior management participation.

I always give warnings from my previous experience, but until the participants arrive at the “do” stage, it just doesn’t click. They will nod their heads in philosophical agreement with the warnings and inevitably proceed down the path until they hit that same wall of discovery. Finally it clicks.

No longer do I get red in the face. I don’t jump up and down any more. No longer do I get angry when they have proceeded through my warning. I have learned to throw out the waffles.

You know how it is when you cook waffles: you use the first batch to season the grill. You get everything to the right temperature. The first batch is always undercooked or overcooked or both at the same time. It’s not fit to eat. You might drool a little, but you toss them to the dog and get on to the next batch.

It is the same thing with creating an eBusiness strategy and with executing that first strategy. Even if you have a good strategy, you are not going to get the execution step right. Get over it and get on with its replacement.

I recommend that eBusiness strategies be “refreshed” every six months. Get all the workshop participants, senior management, and interest holders together for a day to assess where you have been and to make appropriate changes. Usually, these will be only small changes.

But have the courage to throw out a flawed strategy; it’s just a waffle.

Understand the consequences of any failure. If your job is on the line, it isn’t a pilot. Everyone needs to clearly understand expectations for both success and failure. It is best to get on paper what the key points of failure will be and how you intend to mitigate those risks. At some point, there will be just too many unknowns or a series of uncertainties mounded on top of one another to reasonably calculate an outcome. At that point, you cannot just throw up your hands. It is best at this stage to review your dilemma with management and get it all out in the open. Once it is, your task is to make sure it transitions from being “in the open” to “on paper.”

This is not essentially a “cover your tail” exercise; it is also an avenue to circulate the problem to a wider audience who may have had a similar experience or may know of other ways to manage the risk.

Take the edge off failure by keeping the risk down.

It's an itsy bitsy spider world. There is a great deal to be learned from the song we teach our children:

The Itsy-bitsy spider went up the waterspout,
Down came the rain and washed the spider out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain,
So the itsy-bitsy spider went up the spout again.

It's not the end of the world if you fail, provided you have set the right expectations. It's just the end of this round, and now it's time to go on to the next round. Buck yourself up. Remain enthusiastic. Don't allow yourself or others to get discouraged. Take courage. Continue to trust your intuition. Keep trying. You'll get it right.

Some day your kite will soar.

'Tis a lesson you should heed, Try, try again. If at first you don't succeed, Try, try again.
- Thomas H. Palmer (1782 - 1861) *Teacher's Manual* (1840)



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