

Intuition

I still bear the crooked little finger on my left hand to remind me. I knew before I swung that it was a dumb idea. My intuition told me to stop, but some lessons have to be learned the painful way.

There was a boy in my neighborhood who really got on my nerves. He was always picking on me. He wasn't very big and I knew I could take him. One day we were playing baseball in my backyard. He pushed me just a bit too far. I had told him repeatedly that if he didn't "knock it off" I was going to "knock him off!" But he just kept after me.

I tried to ignore him, but he just continued to pester me. Something kept telling me to "just walk away." I knew this wasn't going to end well. I tried to get back to playing ball, but he nagged at me. The other guys tried to get both of us to stop and "just get back to the game."

I thought about how the guys would see me. If I backed down now I would be a chicken. If I slugged him I would be a hero, because I knew he bugged them, too. Yet, I also knew this would not be the end of it. I knew punishment was coming if I acted on my anger.

But I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't ignore him. I was fuming. He pushed and pushed. I just knew my mom was going to kill me if I slugged him. I could hear the speech coming, "What got into you?" I could feel the disappointment she would express. I could hear her curt, sharp remarks already. My intuition told me to stop; my anger told me to kill!

The next time he pushed is when I snapped. I threw down my bat and charged. Where he had been standing, I could see I had him cornered. I had seen a lot of

westerns on TV and so I pretty well knew how to do this. Man-to-man combat. No big deal. Standing there slugging it out. I knew I could whip him.

What I didn't figure on is that he would duck. I also didn't remember that there was a redwood fence immediately behind his head. Funny, I had lived there my whole life; you would think I would remember the small detail of the redwood fence when I followed up the right jab with that ill-fated left hook!

I endured the pain and didn't even let my mom look at it. I hid the fact that I had hurt myself. It hurt far into the night. The guys wouldn't tell on me, so I thought I was home clear. I thought the pain in my hand was lesson enough.

Other than him ducking and the redwood fence, the other thing I hadn't figured on was him telling the principal...until the vice-principal called me out of class the following morning.

eBusiness is more about intuition than anything else I have experienced in my business career. Messages are coming at us from all directions. Frequently these messages conflict with one another. The pace of development is astonishing. Nothing ever seems to be on a straight route. You finally see a technology that will solve an age-old problem and you think you are all set! Until you realize it causes two other problems. Then you go after those issues. And so B2B goes.

Nothing is ever straightforward and direct. Either the technology isn't ready or the business partners aren't ready. Standards that sound so good fall short for unexpected reasons. Half the battle is figuring out what will not work and crossing that off the list of potential solutions. Most times you just have to trust your gut.

People always say, "Give the customer what they want." I have yet to hear what the customer really wants when I first talk to them about it. Generally, it takes a few times to get beyond the short-term issues. It also takes a period of developing trust. That requires commitment and consistent behavior from your whole organization. So if you think you are going to just waltz into a customer's location and find out what they want, think again. Plan for it that way. Accept the alternate route to success; step back to get their short-term objectives (which may have nothing to do with eBusiness) out of the way, to get to the long-term objectives.

Be leery of anyone who wants to do eBusiness with you, but cannot articulate crisp and specific objectives. If someone says they “want to (or worse yet, must) save money”, run away. If someone says “we can each save 10% on our costs by doing step a, b and c;” listen.

In the day-to-day activities of the work world, we rarely have time to sit back and think about what we want from our suppliers and customers. We take even less time delving into what our customers want and need.

I worked in a three-tier supply chain business (manufacturer to distributor to user) where prices were being negotiated between the manufacturer and user, but the distributor needed to manage the distribution and payment cycles. It was a pretty typical three-tier supply chain arrangement and not a pretty picture for knowing what the customer wants. After all, who is the customer? The one who buys? The one who influences the purchase? What about when the distributor and user don't agree? Not always clear.

When we talked to the distributor about his problems, he came up with elaborate solutions that would have been difficult to manage. We could have built expensive and complex eBusiness mechanisms to improve the communications and cycle-time. If we had listened to these customers' initial needs, we would have.

But delving deeper into the problem gave us an opportunity to look at it differently. It allowed us to reengineer the business process, so that when we executed the eBusiness solution that complemented the process, it was simple, straightforward, and less costly. But we had to trust our gut in order to propose that solution. We had to look beyond today's issues and problems and change our paradigm.

Ignorance is not bliss; ignorance is ignorance. “No information” is never the preferred approach. We have such bad supply chain processes in one business that it is nearly impossible to quote a delivery date for a product that is even remotely accurate.

As a result, the business has their employees quote “six months” when asked when something will be delivered. When pressed they will work to get a more accurate date, which is more likely to be two or three months out. The thought is if we give the customer a date that is always “far out” (bad information), but deliver to a better date (good reality), that will satisfy the customer.

In fact, perception is reality. The business failed to recognize three things: 1) requiring the customer to come back to get information they needed was a major irritant, 2) customers expect that you know “sometime” in order to run your business and, therefore, we must have been hoarding information for some reason, and 3) the customer already knew we have lousy supply chain processes. For us, it is just information, but they *lived* our supply chain problems.

I know what you are thinking, “I can’t give information that he can use to hang me!” Wrong attitude. Instead, look at it this way, “You deserve to be hung! Now what are you going to do about it?”

Don’t get trapped into thinking you need to fix the supply chain before you can or have to fix the information chain. Use the information chain, internally and externally, as your report card for improving the process. They go hand-in-hand. You can’t wait.

Trading partners dissatisfied with the information they receive? You have found an ideal place to apply eBusiness.

Watch for “human lubricant.” Also known as “sneakerware” or “throwing bodies” at a problem. This is when the flow of information or products requires “extra people” to maintain, manage, or smooth the business process. We tend to see it everywhere. It may be where we have set up a pilot process and don’t want to change the back office applications to support it. Or where the business has outpaced the information systems and so we setup “one off” business processes to manage the disparity.

In effect, we “smooth” the rough spots by lubricating the process with people-- “holding hands”, monitoring, expediting the activities, doing “whatever it takes” to make the process work with minimal friction for the customer.

We had all our systems geared to a multiple level warehousing operation. We would manufacture items and then place them in warehouses around the country where they could be consolidated with many other items for efficient delivery to many customers. It was slow and expensive, but worked reasonably well for many years. Until we needed to move product from the manufacturing plant directly to customers using full truckload deliveries.

The business processes and systems weren't structured to support those processes, so we added people to "align" the real product flow to the information flow. But filling the gap was expensive.

The hard part is that you need to look for these things at both your site and your trading partner's site. We typically have enough problems without going outside our four walls to find more!

Throwing bodies at your business problems? You have found an ideal place to apply eBusiness.

eBusiness drives a different business case. There is all manor of bad information out there. There are many poor ways at looking at the data. There are many "self preservation" biases we hear. You need to get beyond all of that when your instinct tells you.

Here are the truths concerning eBusiness business cases:

- There are only two types: bad and lucky.
- Figures lie and liars figure.
- There are far too many unknowns to do a thorough business case.
- Like sands through an hourglass, your competitive advantage is slipping away.
- When you get right down to it, "You have to trust your gut."

If eBusiness were easy, management wouldn't need us. If you think you can wait until the technology "sorts itself out," think again. If you think you can wait until the entire "math equation" makes sense, think again.

In some instances you need to resist the impulse to move forward. In the same way, I needed to resist the impulse to throw a punch; there can be unconsidered or unseen consequences in our acts. But you also can't afford to wait too long. You can get killed in going too slowly as in going too fast. In the end, you have to trust your instinct to tell you when the time is right. And when it is, act decisively.

"Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" -David G. Farragut, Battle of Mobile Bay, August 5, 1864



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