

Letting Others Go First

Do you remember when you were dismissed for recess? At Mulberry Elementary School, we would all race to the swing sets. The swing sets were straight out from the doors, next to the end of the pavement. There was other playground equipment, such as “jungle gyms” and the sandboxes, but nothing quite like those swing sets.

We had a swing set at home, but it wasn’t nearly as tall as these swings. The one at home was maybe six feet tall and had a wooden seat. This swing was nearly twice that tall and had a heavy rubber seat. I remember the different sensation we would experience on the larger swing, as if its size made it more “lumbering.” You would complete the long arc forward and almost feel suspended in space, experiencing weightlessness for a few seconds. The swing would follow its path back and we would pump to bring it back forward again. We would lean out, to once again experience the freedom of being suspended above the ground.

I loved to swing. Come to think of it, I still do.

I would always race out of the room to get to the front of the line for the swings, often hearing a “take it easy” or “let’s not push” from Miss Waters as I shoved my way toward the front. Sometimes I would feel a bit guilty. Other times I didn’t feel great about getting to the swing in front of everybody because my friends would have to wait for me to finish. The teacher would tell us when our time was up and we would stop swinging and the next person would take his turn. I would go off and play elsewhere.

But sometimes I would look back at the ones who were swinging after I had gotten off and they were trying new things, things I hadn’t thought to try. Maybe they had figured out a way to synchronize their swing with the person next to them. They would laugh and yell to each other or maybe mirror one another’s antics. Maybe they had figured out a neat way of jumping off the swing at the end of their turn, such as landing on both feet like a gymnast coming off the parallel bars. Maybe they were just

laughing with each other and seeming to be having more fun than I had.

Let's face it: Being first is fun. You don't have to wait in line. Everyone has to watch, and wait, for you. You are a pioneer.

But going forward without a map or without a formula for success can be nerve racking. You are on your own: sink or swim. When you succeed, it can be great fun. You are the life of the party. By your own intelligence, hard work, and perseverance you can do great things. It doesn't get better than that.

I had the opportunity to lead a trade association as we developed a cross-industry B2B standard for trading billions of dollars worth of goods across multiple levels of the supply chain. I facilitated work across competitors to define our path forward as we debated the impact of various decisions. I had to establish trust with people who didn't know me and, almost by definition, certainly didn't have any reason to trust me. To a large degree, even through we were collaborating, I was still the enemy.

It was great fun being a pioneer. It turned out to be a real test of both technical knowledge and intriguing politics.

I also still have friendships borne out of working together with my competitors. Fundamentally, their issues were my issues and their trials were my trials. We all felt that way. We were careful not to do anything illegal or that would have the appearance of impropriety, but we also worked very closely together. We pushed ourselves to trust beyond the norm. We reached beyond our view, when our instincts screamed danger at us. We succeeded and we all learned from each other.

But when you fail, you are on your own. Your boss...the guy you thought was your cheerleader...lays the "problem" at your feet. He disassociates himself from your activities. So much for encouraging risk-taking! Being a pioneer is not without its own risks to ourselves.

So when should you be a pioneer?

- When B2B functionality is very closely aligned to your business strategy. This assumes you know "what you are about" (surprisingly often, that is not the case).
- When the reward far exceeds the risk of failure. If it is keeping you and your colleagues up at night with excitement, that is a clue you are on to something big!
- When your trading partners think it is exciting and want to help you. You have gotten their commitment to help with piloting, feedback, assessments, metrics, etc.
- When it is substantially different from what everyone else is thinking. When you can come out of nowhere to "capture the flag." Nothing is more exciting than knocking a

market on its ear.

- When the risk of failure can be moderated. When it can be managed or accepted to some degree. I suggest you get this in writing from all parties, that they are willing to acknowledge and accept the risk.

But there are also advantages of waiting and watching. I am not talking about delaying until the optimal time of getting in the game. No, I am talking about using the time to become prepared; this is an equal activity level to pioneering.

It can be fine to let others go first. But figure out how to stay partnered with them. Stay involved and interested. Pick their brains at every opportunity. Cheer them on. Encourage them. And help them pick up the pieces if they should fall.

You need to be asking yourself the following questions to start down the road of successful waiting and watching:

- How can I add value to what someone else (such as my competitor) is doing?
- What are the “one off” opportunities? What can I pick up from other industries that could apply here?
- How can I do the exact same thing-- only faster, better, or cheaper?
- With whom can I connect who has had a somewhat similar challenge?

Once you have thoughts on how to proceed with any of the previous questions, set up short “deep dive” projects to evaluate them in full detail. Commit the resources needed to get after the roots. Time box the process (typically 30 days) and conclude them with some formal management review.

This type of activity is rarely done because the benefits are not yet in sight. And even when it is done, there is always the risk that things will change. Try this some time: ask your management to invest in something that may *never* pay out. Ask them for sizable funds to learn sometime in a preemptive fashion. They may get you a modest amount of seed resources to get something started. They may politely (or maybe less than politely) tell you to go away. This is a clear indication that B2B is not right for your company (or the company is not right for you) or whether you have more work to change your companies culture.

And when should you follow?

- When you can steal from the best.
- When you can learn from others without the risks that come with pioneering.
- When the risk of failure cannot be moderated or management isn’t willing to “sign up” (i.e., more than lip service) to share the risks with you.
- When being first is of little or no value.

But don't try to be "half-pregnant." Attempting to be the "fast follower" always seems to satisfy management that they are doing the "reasonable and prudent" thing. You can hear it in a lot of ways: "Don't invest until the market has sorted out" or "Don't start until you have a tangible project where benefits are clear." The problem is you don't know what you don't know. You can't see enough to understand the benefits, much less be clear about them.

You can appear to "do the prudent thing" into extinction.

Fast follower strategies in B2B are normally high risk. People don't end up committing the necessary level of resources to "keep up." Mostly, people just find themselves flat footed at the bottom of the learning curve, while others (that choose to lead and commit the resources) get over the top of the curve and are gaining traction. It is impossible to gauge the time to begin to move forward aggressively because it is so easy to be disengaged and inattentive.

Sorry, "fast follower" strategy is an oxy-moron. Those who hope to be fast followers become "also rans." The lack of investment in getting ready to follow precludes your being fast. That is not a strategy. It is a tactic to avoid a strategy.

There is a time and place for being the pioneer; there is a time and place for being a follower. There is never a time for not getting prepared.

Being a pioneer or a follower is a conscious choice. Make it. Stick with it.

We should not only use all the brains we have, but all that we can borrow. - Woodrow Wilson



Reprint provided courtesy of

Duane H. Cook

Copyright © 2004 Duane H. Cook and
Strategic eBusiness - Cook Consulting