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Milk and Cookies

Do you remember the celebrations we had in kindergarten?

We would all participate and enjoy the celebration. If it was your birthday, you were really someone special that day! You would get to sit in the “birthday chair” at the front of the class near the teacher. We would all wear birthday hats and sing “Happy Birthday” to the celebrity of the day.

Any event in our lives seemed worthy of a celebration. After all, it wasn’t just birthdays that were our special events. Special events were Grandmother coming for a visit or a cat having kittens. It was the first day of spring or a new baby brother.

For these extra special celebrations, cupcakes with swirled frosting washed down with orange Kool-Aid™ were a special treat! I can taste them right now. Can you? That wasn’t too much sugar for you, was it?

Miss Waters would announce the big success or the happy event. She would explain why it was important. Which sometimes wasn’t all that obvious. It didn’t need to be important to everyone; it just needed to be important to one person. She might explain that Marbee’s grandmother was “out from Chicago” for her grandson’s Bar Mitzvah. Our teacher would explain why that was significant to Marbee, her brother, and her grandmother. Then she would ask Marbee about her grandmother and what special memories they shared. She was building for Marbee something for which to be thankful. She was celebrating her family. She was also building for her a desire to do well and to make her family proud.

The room mother would organize some of the celebrations. Mothers would do the shopping and baking and make special trips to school to hand out the goodies. It was always fun when your mom came to class.

With our faces covered in frosting and sticky hands all around, our mothers and Miss Waters would share in the special moment.

There were rewards for small successes in the classroom, like a good job sharing or bringing back Marvin's cage exceptionally clean (Marvin was our guinea pig). The celebration didn't need to be elaborate to be meaningful. For those smaller celebrations it was typically "milk and cookies." Seemed like we had a little celebration almost every day. Milk and cookies were just fine with me. Each of us would be instilled with the encouragement to do well and the desire to please.

Over time the rewards for achievement became fewer and fewer. By the time we entered high school the acknowledgments had become typically negative punishments instead of positive reinforcements. After two solid weeks of diligent study to get through midterms and "finals," with the threat of not making it into the college of our choice, we were left emotionally and mentally exhausted. Our positive reward was sometimes just our own momentary sigh of relief as we hunkered down to begin the next semester.

When we entered the business world, this translated into arcane annual performance reviews. You know the process. We start the year by guessing what we can do. There are really too many dynamics and too many things that are out of our control that influence this process to make those guesses realistic. But we have to get something on paper, so we call these our "personal goals." We are handed "team goals" over which we have less or even no control. Taken together, those become our "performance expectations."

We write these expectations down, file away that paper, and, in the hectic pace of getting our "real" work done, we forget about it, until we periodically meet with our boss to see what progress we have made. We attempt to convince him to make adjustments to align with how the real world is turning. Yet the boss looks at those adjustments with dollar signs in his eyes. He sees those adjustments as a "risk" for

higher wages and bigger bonuses than the budget will allow. It doesn't fit into his neat little world. It doesn't matter what the goal really should be.

Then at the end of the year we compare the "performance expectations" against our perceived results. It all seems such a waste of time and so irrelevant.

In normal business the pace of change is fast enough, but in the eBusiness world we live at a frantic pace. Our performance reviews seem even more irrelevant and even harmful to the progress we need to make.

If we can really drive to multiple, overlapping eBusiness projects, both our traditional measuring process and rewards need to go out the window. There is plenty of opportunity to celebrate. But we need performance rewards that mirror the rapid nature, intensity, and level of commitment of B2B. Someday our companies may get there; until then, we need to look more introspectively.

Reflect on your week each week. I try to set aside a few minutes each week to reflect on what we have done. Just a few minutes on Friday, alone in my office, reviewing my calendar for the week just completed and looking forward into the following week.

It is not easy and I often find myself slipping into how much is left to be done, rather than recognize how much has been accomplished. With eBusiness projects we have an opportunity to break the work down into small, meaningful cycles. As we get better with that we need to remain mindful of how much is being accomplished. We need to establish communications techniques and forums for making others aware of both our trials and accomplishments.

I recently gave a talk that reflected on all that we had accomplished over the past two years. *Whew!* It was amazing how much we had done. If I hadn't been asked to talk on that specific subject, I wouldn't have gone back and looked at the facts and figures. Oh, I knew them in pieces; I had quoted them often enough. But I didn't reflect on the whole picture. I wouldn't have made all the comparisons that were relevant. I have enough to do in the present to not worry about the past.

It had slipped up on us that, in ten months, we had grown our volumes ten fold and had another ten fold increase in user volume expected over the next five months!

But more importantly we had taken for granted all that we had learned and all the challenges we had overcome. We knew a great deal more now about what we needed to do to be successful, but we hadn't shared that with others. We hadn't made their lives easier. We hadn't encouraged those struggling with the same issues and climbing up the same learning curve. We had left others to reinvent the wheel.

We had looked at this as "tooting our own horn." We should have looked at it as giving others a hand. In reality, we should be expected by others to do both.

Celebrating your successes. In kindergarten it was "kittens and coloring;" now it is quality review boards and "phases and gates" reviews. Now it is management presentations and business cases. The world has changed a bit around us.

Sometimes we have had bosses who were real mentors. They knew what to say and when. They were more encouragers than taskmasters.

Over time I have seen fewer and fewer of those types of bosses. I have an unproven theory that this all changed when layoffs became pervasive across the business landscape. Now bosses have a conflict. An encouragement and high praise could seem contradictory to the judge, when the highly arbitrary employee ranking process places that highly praised individual in the lower quadrant!

We have lost something. We have lost someone to remind us of our accomplishments on a frequent basis. We have lost someone to remind us that there is a time to have our heads down in the details and a time to hold our heads up high. Certainly they remind us enough to keep our noses to the grindstone.

If you are managing an eBusiness operation you need to keep recognition on the forefront. You need to look for incremental steps to celebrate. This is not large scale, significant, costly celebrations (though there is a place for that). This is celebrating, recognizing, and rewarding our small steps and our large steps.

Celebrate others' successes. We need to take the time to congratulate others on their success. One of my prized memories is a note I received from a competitor. It said what a wonderful job I had done leading an initiative from which he and his company had benefited. While we were still competitors, he could see the value I had added to the community. He could also see how I had broken the ice with our mutual customers and how he could follow in my footsteps.

This is not, however, something I feel I do well. I feel awkward telling people what a nice job they have done, because I hate that pained look of embarrassment on another's face. One person I work with does a great job of saying "great job" frequently, sincerely, and unabashedly. I know I should and can do better.

Like most people I also get inwardly focused and need to make the commitment of time and energy to look more diligently around me.

Celebrate small successes. We need to celebrate our own successes. We cannot wait for that significant reward that comes every so often and frequently gets "hung up" based on business cycles, economic conditions, and budget squabbles.

Part of celebrating is renewing in us the desire to do well. Part of celebrating is remembering that work has its own rewards. I can despair at my company's financial performance, while at the same time recognizing my own contributions to our success "against the tide."

Nothing wrong with an extra dessert once in a while, is there? Nothing wrong with taking the family out to dinner and discussing your "mini-victory."

Cookies still work. Bon appetit!

Be satisfied with success in even the smallest matter, and think that even such a result is no trifle. - Marcus Aurelius (121–180)



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