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Social First

I will always remember my twin sister and me on the front porch at home before our first day of kindergarten. Our nametags and important enrollment papers were firmly attached to our shirts with safety pins. My hair was slicked down. We were wearing new “school clothes” and “school shoes.” Mom took pictures, cried, kissed us, cried some more, and off we went.

We were less than twenty yards into our walk toward school before my sister needed to run back to the bathroom. I guess we were all nervous.

Once we were at school we were directed to the cafetorium, dutifully sorted out by helpful mothers and staff, and lined up in front of our teachers. Finally, we were marched single file into our classrooms. I will never forget the first time I saw my kindergarten classroom—the asphalt tile floor, the large throw rug and my teacher’s rocking chair, where she would sit and read to us. We sat on the floor and anxiously awaited our first few minutes of school.

I was assigned to Miss Waters’ class. No, it wasn’t love at first sight: But it was close. Do all boys fall in love with their kindergarten teachers?

Our indoctrination was not about teaching us anything in particular. It was all about making us comfortable. We needed to understand the few basic rules; there would be much more to come later. We needed to know how to play well with each other, but most things could wait for another day. We needed to learn many things like writing and arithmetic, but all that would wait for another year.

First and foremost, right now, we needed to learn social skills for getting along with each other. We needed to establish trust with one another.

We need to put first things first. I have been involved with eBusiness for more years than I wish to count. It has always worked well when we have gotten first things first. The social before the technical. We rarely start with the social. Why is that?

eBusiness projects have a high mortality rate, but not for the reasons that come to us at first blush. I frequently encounter businesses or functional units that are so driven to “get their savings” that they forget that getting those savings depends upon putting first things first.

I cannot count the number of times I’ve seen businesses attempt to drive a trading partner to some solution. Usually, they puff up their chests and declare, “If they want to do business with us, they will do it our way.” They lay out their technical requirements, plans, and schedules. They line up their pilot customers based on some elaborate formula to obtain the highest value in the shortest amount of time or with least effort. Hogwash!

Rarely does that work. Oh, it may work sometimes if you are the 800-pound gorilla. The Wal*Marts of the world can pull it off (or at least sometimes do). Not easily, however, even for them. And most of us aren’t the 800-pound gorilla.

If you are the buyer in the relationship, you typically have more leverage. But usually not enough. I have seen every excuse in the book by suppliers and customers. I have seen every method imaginable employed to delay moving forward. Sometimes intentionally, other times unintentionally; sometimes for valid reasons, other times not. So much for “getting them to do it our way.”

I have even seen more than one customer push aggressively to gain agreement to move forward only to be stopped cold in their tracks a few days later.

And I have seen three extremely successful eBusiness initiatives in my career; all three laid the correct foundation for being successful. All three were highly focused on the implementation phase from *the customer’s viewpoint*. All three engaged customers early on in the process to understand their issues. All three had a high level of customer involvement and commitment. All three tested and retested their assumptions with the users to understand whether or not we were “on the mark.”

None of these solutions utilized the latest, sexiest solutions. None of these had to wait for the next generation of technology solution and software. All three projects were

hard work. All three were wildly successful, beyond our expectations. If anything, we were remiss in not expecting more of ourselves. All three put “first things first.”

Unfortunately, we typically exhibit corporate amnesia. Corporate historians are few and far between. Usually we are in such a rush to get on with the next projects that we don't pass along the legacy of our journey. We don't typically create the forums in our companies to discuss our pain and suffering and share our successes. We fail to retain “knowledge management” of what works, and what doesn't. As a result, we exhibit corporate amnesia and the next group gets to learn the same lessons and endure the same pain. They get to risk failure and learn the lesson of “first things first” the hard way.

I am not talking about eliminating the learning curve; painful as it may be, most of us learn best from our mistakes. I am talking about reducing the learning curve on the initial pain points of our projects so that we can get deeper and deeper into our projects and learn new things that can be passed along to others. In other words, rushing to the next learning curve.

eBusiness is not a trail we travel by ourselves. Other than very limited internal B2E (Business to Employee) applications, most eBusiness applications involve parties outside our four walls (vendors or suppliers, customers, carriers, banks, etc.). Engaging those outside our organizations requires social skills-- the skills we learned in kindergarten. It requires getting into our trading partners' heads to understand their concerns, their visions, their desires, their passions, and their issues.

I have never been to a customer's site for an initial discussion of eBusiness where I didn't get blasted with the “issue du jour.” These issues typically are not at the heart of their problems and never are based around my reason for being there. But you are the warm body that represents your company. Consider this your test. If you can help with that issue, no matter how off topic or sidetracked it may be, you get handed a chip. This is a trust chip. You will get to use that trust chip at some point. It may be when you need a favor from the customer in getting some phase of the project done. It may be used years later when the customer needs to make an investment and can't quite see the benefits of some activity. When you have earned your first trust chip, you

have moved along the line of a successful implementation, and you may not have even gotten to the issue at hand.

“Socially comfortable” comes before “technology comfortable.” The essential truth that we seem to always set aside is “high tech requires high touch.” We need to nurture and help our trading partners through the transition to eBusiness. This is new territory for most people. Those of us who have successfully been down the rapids of eBusiness before need to assist others in their first journey. We need to recognize the inherent dangers and risks to them that are involved.

This requires a conscious decision on our part to dedicate the time and energy necessary to make others comfortable that the feelings and concerns they have are not only normal, but to be expected. The stark truth is that we need to love our trading partners enough to want them to succeed. We need to desire their success above our own.

eBusiness projects live and die, based on our ability to lay the right foundation; helping others over the mental and emotional stresses that comes with change. This is not done in large classrooms with PowerPoint presentations. It is done over coffee and a notepad; eyeball-to-eyeball and heart-to-heart. It requires social skills first.

So set aside the technical solutions for another day. Get out and talk with your trading partners. Tell them about your hopes and dreams; and find out about their desires. Don't get mired in the technical and don't try to map out all the answers: Tell them you are still looking for the right question. They will appreciate your honesty and the trust you build will do much to assure your future success. More importantly, they will want to do eBusiness with you.

A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge. Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881)



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