

We All Need Encouragement

At first, I thought she just wanted to please Miss Waters. Then I thought she wanted attention. Then I realized that was the way Robin was—very helpful. Always!

When you sat at her table she wanted to make sure that everyone had the colored pencil they liked and that the pencils were sharp enough for everyone. If not, she would pull a plastic pencil sharpener and napkin out of her pocket and sharpen the pencil while neatly piling the shavings on the napkin. When she was done, she would quietly and neatly roll up the napkin and throw it away.

She would make sure we all had enough paper. She wouldn't just take her sheets and pass the stack along like the rest of us would. She would distribute one to each person individually. She wasn't flashy about it. She just quietly distributed the papers or pencils or crayons or whatever. Miss Waters never said a word to her when she would get out of her seat to help others. If that had been me, I would have been ordered back to my seat! I guess Miss Waters recognized that that was just the way Robin was.

Of course, this always made her last in finishing projects, but she never seemed to mind. But what I really remember about Robin is that when we would finish our projects, she would stop and take a good look at what we had done and tell us what she liked about our pictures, and then drift back to her own work. She never failed to take notice. She never failed to tell us what she liked.

I can imagine her today, organizing church picnics, arranging multiple family vacations, and helping out with the Girl Scouts and soccer teams. Working behind the

scenes to make sure everything was “just right.” But I bet she also encourages her kids and all the kids she encounters to do their best.

Teaching skills by demonstration. Teaching character by example.

eBusiness can be an uncomfortable space. I remember attending a class on EDI in the early 1990s. Two hours into the class, at the first morning break, the instructor pointed out that we were now all in the 99th percentile of business people in understanding electronic commerce. Interesting revelation, but I doubted it could possibly be true. It took me a few months to realize that it was true. There is so much misunderstanding of what eBusiness is all about that it is almost embarrassing.

Most people think it is about saving money and there certainly is an aspect of cost savings. But that is like saying golf is about making the lowest score. Certainly, if you are good enough, you can make a low score. For most of us, making a low score without being outdoors, enjoying the beauty of a spring day, getting exercise, and cavorting with our friends would be a very shallow experience indeed.

eBusiness is about relationships. I have never seen a greater opportunity to get close to your customers and suppliers than with eBusiness. But I have also never seen so many opportunities get close but slip between our fingers. The reality is that we can save far more money if we work together to do eBusiness than in devising our strategies in a vacuum and trying to convince our trading partners that it is a good thing for them (no matter how good for them it may actually be).

We can also streamline processes and gain a feel of “slaying the dragons” in our business. We have opportunities to rethink our business models and toss out those things that no longer make a great deal of sense. But eBusiness is not a panacea. It is very hard work. Never mind the advertisements that make it look so simple: “Buy our eBusiness application server...life will be good.”

Potential trading partners are crying out for help. They are looking for solutions. They are looking for new opportunities. But they typically don’t know where to start. The starting point is not pulling together a bunch of vendors to do “request for proposals.” The starting point is sharpening your pencils and getting down to the hard work of figuring out your opportunities. But we need the help and encouragement of others along the way.

We all need to mentor and be mentored. We all need to mentor. My father used to point out that the best way to reinforce something you have learned was to teach someone else. We have a responsibility to pass along what we learn and experience. We need to share our insights. We need to be willing enough to share our successes and brave enough to share our failures. We need to help each other up and over the learning curve. Without this sharing going on in our companies our trading partners recognize a lack of depth. They see inconsistencies in our approach and our confidence. Every day we have an opportunity to share and reinforce our experiences with our co-workers. Every day we have the opportunity to sharpen each other and reinforce what we have learned and, more importantly, share why it is important.

We can use either formal or informal methods to mentor those junior to us. It doesn't have to be a well documented and largely regulated activity, though that can bring discipline to mentoring. But it needs to be regular and consistent.

We all have things we can learn from others. These can be outside of the traditional boundaries of eBusiness, such as with team building or learning the financial evaluations common to a solid business case. There are always others around who can share their expertise, if we are willing to tap into other people.

We need champions. I have never seen an eBusiness strategy "bubble-up" from the bottom. I have read about it occurring once or twice, but have never seen it take place myself. By sheer force of will, chance, or luck some managers have gotten the attention of the senior management to make something happen. Well, not in my experience.

It is akin to pulling oneself up by the bootstrap. It is probably not physically impossible, but not very likely to occur.

More commonly, I have seen businesses "assign" the task of defining the eBusiness strategy to an individual or small team. Universally, these don't have the breadth of vision that is required. They also don't have the level of commitment required to prepare and execute the plans against the strategy. Most of these are dead on arrival; we just don't recognize they are dead.

A champion can carry the banner for your initiative. A champion can gain access to the decision makers at your company. He or she can get the right people in the

organization to drive your eBusiness strategies to complement your general business strategies. They can point out the business case and keep attention focused on the decisions at hand.

The best champion I ever saw was a whisperer!

He wasn't flashy about making formal presentations. He didn't show off nor was he "fluffed up" about working with senior levels of management every day. Instead, he would sit next to the key decision makers and during presentations he would lean over and whisper a few words that would "connect" the presentation to the decision makers' real world problems and concerns.

He might, for example, be watching a presentation that talked about reducing cost for supporting small businesses and lean over and say, "Have you thought about how Joe might apply this?" Joe might have been the last guy on the other person's mind. He might have been focused on some other activity a million miles away.

He would guide the process to the right conclusion. He would "bump" the process along by nurturing as well as confining, to maintain focus. Just like herding cattle; keep them moving down the path and not wandering astray.

A key role for the champion is to keep management's attention focused on the task at hand. There are so many issues to work through and so many demands placed on the key decision makers at our companies that somebody needs to help frame and focus the eBusiness initiatives. That is the job of the champion. He confines both subject matter and timeframe. He encourages the management process along.

He may or may not be the sponsor to your B2B initiatives, but he will play a vital role in your success.

We all need to be a cheerleader. The everyday tasks of eBusiness can drain us of energy. The demands of short-term projects can weigh on us. We need a cheerleader to keep us encouraged. This person can point out the importance of our activities, just when we are gutting out the most mundane details. They show us the peaks when we are in the valleys. They demonstrate for us that success in climbing the mountain is not in running up the hill, but in small, continuous steps.

We all need Robins in our lives. People to encourage us, exhort us, and cheer us. People to mentor us and help us along. People to play the champion and the cheerleader.

They sustain and strengthen us. They are really the giants among us.

"You get the best out of others when you give the best of yourself." -Harry Firestone



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