

## **Wonder**

*Many days, especially during spring, we would walk home after school. It wasn't far and there were many diversions on our path. We would play catch or throw rocks as we crossed the schoolyard to leave by the rear gate. We would play marbles on the hardpan areas where many shoes had first erased the grass, than prevented the replacement seeds from sprouting. Or we would take a swing at an imaginary baseball and run around the bases to slide into third base before the imaginary tag. A triple!*

*There was a small creek near school. Actually we just called it a creek; it wasn't a creek at all. It was a small, fenced off storm drain that contained a small amount of water year round (probably just sprinkler runoff) and was only full immediately following a big rain.*

*The concrete near the drain was slimy with strings of green moss. Long, dark "feelers" of moss swayed in the trickle of water, holding on tight to the concrete to keep from being washed away.*

*Usually there wasn't much to see in the creek. One of my friends had gone down there one weekend with his father to capture pollywogs. They took mason jars and scooped up some of the gray creatures. The pollywogs were always in motion, wiggling, fighting against the current. They brought them home and Jon kept them out in his garage. His mom wouldn't think of having them in the house. Each day we would dump a little turtle food in the jars, though I don't remember ever seeing them actually eat.*

*We would watch them for a few minutes every day to see what was new and different. I couldn't believe what Jon was telling me-- that these squiggly little things were going to get fat and grow legs. Initially they were only about a quarter inch long. In*

*a short time they had doubled in both length and width. His dad would tell him what we could expect to see next and he would relay the stories on to us. At first we didn't really believe him. It was just too strange to believe. But we watched as each step unfolded as his dad had foretold. Soon we were able to notice stubs of legs beginning to appear. Then they became full-formed legs with flippers.*

*Not long afterward, we had an explosion of frogs in the neighborhood.*

In is wonderful to see the unexpected in eBusiness. I remember once debating the “wisdom” of telling our distributors when we projected their deliveries of materials to arrive. We had a fair amount of variability in our supply chain. Our age old practice had been to tell customers to expect the delivers in seven-to-ten days. We thought that was pretty good; it seemed to cover the bases-- over ninety-nine percent of our situations. About the only time we took longer than two weeks was for “make to order” items or real screw-ups. We were “fat, dumb, and happy” that this was the best we could do and distributors were happy with the “seven-to-ten day” response. Or so we thought.

It was interesting to talk to these distributors to see what seven-to-ten days meant to them. We were surprised by their answer—no, shocked. Almost every one of them told us it meant seventeen calendar days. That blew us away!

But their logic made a great deal of sense once we viewed it through their eyes. It turned out they were taking a worse case scenario (of ten days), interpreting that as working days (which adds on weekends), then adding three days of in-transit time for seventeen calendar days. Since that was such a long time out and since there was a good deal of variability, they wouldn't even plan deliveries to their customers against the information. Instead, they would wait until the materials were delivered to schedule those deliveries! To their customers they would quote the same lead-time we did and if that was not satisfactory, they would typically inventory stock for their customers.

In hindsight, it is now amazing that we thought we could get away with it!

When we evaluated our actual deliveries from end-to-end, we found that 80% of them were hitting on the eighth day (plus or minus one day) after ordering. We believed we didn't have a very good story to tell our pilot customers. In fact, just the opposite was true. Our distributors were ecstatic.

They recognized that they could “plan” based on the small delivery date range variability. Even though they had to make some minor adjustments based on the twenty percent of the time we did not make the estimate, this was a great improvement over their earlier experience. Now they could tell their customers eight days instead of seventeen days.

Our evaluations previously had shown that we were “consistent, but slow” in making deliveries. Now they saw us as having made aggressive improvements in our supply chain and that we had dramatically improved the cycle time! Now they viewed us as “consistent, fast, and willing to take bold actions to improve supply.”

All the work in collecting the data further enabled us to make changes to the supply chain. These were “substitutive” changes, but our customers viewed this as sustained, continuous improvement. They believed that improvement was becoming a way of life for us.

Poor information led to poor behaviors on our part, which led to poor information on our customers’ part. The real impact was on the consumers. Improved information flow improved the relationship as well as the perceived and real supply chain.

**We have to look beyond what customers are telling us.** It takes a special kind of listening to customers to be extremely effective. Customers will start talking about today’s situation and work their way forward. But they will do so in “building block” fashion. Only when you have taken in, understood, and responded to the issues of today will they be readily willing to move forward with you. They need to see results. Results build confidence. Repeated satisfactory responses to issues builds trust. Once you have trust, they are willing to move forward with you into the future.

The operative word in the previous sentence is “willing.” You can force change on customers and inherit the whirlwind. At best, you can force change on customers and deal with continual resistance. The alternative is to develop the foundation—the building blocks, that helps them willingly move forward into the future with you. If you do the latter, the transition is emotionally and mentally easier. You don’t end up having to fight two fires at one time—one to proceed with your project and another to keep distractions bounded.

Customers are willing to dream with you. But there is an investment on their part that they have to be willing to make. They have to see that their investment will pay a future dividend, in some form—faster, better, cheaper. The likelihood that the dividend can be realized is directly portioned to the confidence that customers have that you will do “your part.” That is where your history plays a vital role.

Once they can dream with you, expect it to take a great deal of effort to drill down to enable process improvement. They will continually view issues in terms of today’s behavior. You have to help them, and yourself, see how the world can be different. Help see what can be thrown out. Help see how business can be dramatically different.

Together you can dream. Together you can wonder how to build a better future.

**We have to expect the unexpected.** Just as when I watched pollywogs turn into frogs, we have to expect the unexpected. There have been times I have looked back and said to myself, “Why didn’t I see that it would happen that way?”

B2B developments can lead to opportunities that cannot be foretold. Sometimes what you develop gets whispered from customer to customer. The opportunities come back to us when we least expect them.

Once I was asked to make a presentation at a business meeting of all the US dealers in one channel. It was followed by a dinner to which I hadn’t been invited. That changed when some accolades rolled in at the end of the presentation, which were echoed by some others. The acknowledgment was gratifying, but it didn’t influence my future success. Success started by being “set up” in front of other dealers with whom I hadn’t worked before. Those who had waited for others to pioneer knew that they could come to me for help. I couldn’t have paid for that kind of advertising.

Other times our applications “sprout legs.” They not only go places and are used in ways that we don’t anticipate, but sometimes they are contrary to what we design. We built a B2B order entry, order status, and carrier tracking application for customer usage. We were attempting to make it easy to use and highly intuitive. We also built in features that made it better for our employees. It described things in better ways and linked directly to carriers’ web sites.

We had built it with the customer in mind. But our employees found great value in it as well. They clamored for access.

**Go after a different paradigm.** Albert Einstein said, “The important thing is not to stop questioning.” We need to remain unsatisfied with what we have done. We need to look beyond what we have accomplished to determine how we can make things better. That means being willing to throw things out and begin again.

Those of us who have been in the B2B space for a long time have seen the changes in a different light. We watched B2B solutions (proprietary file transfer, EDI, web-based, and XML) enter the landscape. Most of the trade literature has viewed each new technology with one thought: “Out with the old and in with the new.” But the wonder of it all has not been technology displacement (which hasn’t occurred much), but how one stage of the business process has built upon the previous.

If anything, the technology has taken us a step backward. Many of the proponents of both web- and XML-based solutions have stumbled. They didn’t understand the need to look backward to see what had been learned before it earlier eCommerce efforts. They took for granted the failures and trials of the past. They have stumbled on many of the same issues that had been conquered sometimes a quarter of a century before.

We need to question everything—the past as well as the future.

Wonder frees us to think beyond today’s paradigms. Wonder allows us to dream with our customer and suppliers of a better tomorrow. Wonder allows us to conjure B2B solutions that are unimaginable today.

*"Wisdom begins in wonder." -Socrates*



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