

## WHAT'S IN IT FOR US?

“Everything you’ve said is philosophically quite fascinating,” a senior executive of a major company commented to me recently after an introductory seminar. “But can you give me a practical, useful idea of what’s in it for us if we look to understand the way our thinking works? It’s hard for me to see how something that seems so simple and small and self-evident can make such a big difference.”

The questioner’s expertise was skills training. He was long accustomed to bringing technology into his organization. In his mind, people didn’t need or want to understand the thinking behind the technology. If he taught them five ways to do something better, he expected most of them to learn and practice the five ways and do the thing better. If there were an even better way, he assumed he would find out about it from his contacts and then train his people again.

A practical answer sprang full-grown out of his training assumptions. I remembered the many years during which I was sent to one conference after another, charged with gathering useful information and processes to bring back to my organization. I did this through several different careers, so I can remember being at numerous National Meetings of all kinds of This’s and That’s – but they have a common theme in my memory.

When I picked out the sessions to attend, it would seem to me that my choices would really help us in our work. I set out to every meeting with a big empty notebook, plenty of pens, and lots of enthusiasm. During the meetings, I’d be a sponge, rushing from one session to the next, taking copious notes, tracking down the most interesting people to have lunch or dinner with so I could glean more nuggets of valuable information, buying tapes of sessions I wanted to hear but had to miss, and returning home exhausted, but certain that everyone would be thrilled with what I had learned and we would all immediately start to improve.

On my first day back at work, I would open the notebook to sort through my fabulous cache of new information. My heart would sink. Why did I write that down? What did it mean? Why didn’t I ask this question? That speaker’s organization is really different from ours – the ideas seemed great at the time, but they don’t really have anything to do with us. Oh, gosh – we could never do this idea; our whole market is entirely different from the speaker’s. By the time I wrote the required memo to the colleagues who hadn’t attended the meeting, it usually contained the following:

- A bland summary of the purpose of the meeting;
- A brief description of what speakers said was important with careful disclaimers about why those ideas might not be as important to us;

- A list of resource materials from the conference and how to borrow them from me (hardly anyone ever did and many a stack of conference goodies were thrown away undisturbed every time I moved offices).

By the time I finished such memos, I felt that we had wasted the money to send me to that conference, that somehow I had failed to get the “right” information even though I was sure, at the time, that I was doing so, and that we would never be as effective as so-and-so or such-and-such who seemed so confident of their great ideas as they stood to address the meeting. My consolation was that whenever others in the organization were given the opportunity to attend meetings, they had the same experience.

Looking back now, it is transparent to me that I simply did not understand how to learn and how to benefit from others’ knowledge. I did not know that effectiveness arises from people’s own ability to think clearly for themselves in the moment, not merely from the ability to memorize and copy what others have already thought. Also, I had no idea that the power and interest speakers projected at meetings was the by-product of the originality and particular real-time appropriateness of their own ideas, the inspiration from which they had worked. I was swept away by the feeling they demonstrated for seeing new ways to do things, yet I had no recognition whatsoever that I was capable of the same energized creativity in my own work. I was so busy trying to figure out how they were doing things that I missed seeing the source of what was working for them, their own original thought. And I had no recognition that understanding how all of us can tap into a constant, intelligent and infinite source of our own ideas was the point of learning – not stopping to grab a few buckets of someone else’s ideas, then trying to hang onto them and run with them.

My answer to this executive’s question was this: One of the single most practical and useful ways understanding the nature and role of my own thinking helped me was that it made every minute of every day a potential learning experience. It showed me how to see things for myself, bring ideas into clarity, and move forward with confidence. It showed me how to learn from life, and how to go about learning from others. It turned my world of information-gathering inside out, truly.

Until this change in direction, I believed that there were x-many experts in every field and my job was to gather as much of their information as possible, hold it in my head, and learn how to use it as well or better than they did. I lived in a world in which my potential for improvement in any work was measured like RAM on a computer: How much space was available to stack and re-shuffle information? Wanting to know more was like buying a new motherboard. It increased the possibility of processing more stuff faster, but the stuff didn’t come with the board; it was input from outside the system.

The change in me, when it arrived, was neither subtle, nor incremental (although it set in motion a cascade of perpetually increasing faith in it). A change in direction cannot be

subtle or incremental. If you are driving north, and you suddenly realize that you need to go south, it doesn't help to turn a bit northeast. You stop. You turn around. You're now going an entirely new direction. Everything that was in front of you is receding behind you. Everything you couldn't see before is now visible and looming larger.

Yet the change was simple, small and self-evident. It was simple because once I saw that I was going the wrong direction, it didn't look very complicated to just turn around. It was small because it only took one new thought, a moment of inspiration, to see that. And it was self-evident because that thought arrived as obvious. Of course! No information means much unless I can see it through my own mind, with my own eyes. If I can't understand how to learn, and how to trust my own mind to bring the learned and the new to light for me when and how it's needed, I'll spend my life trying to replicate someone else's past, rather than creating my own life and work.

It happened for me at a national meeting of neurosurgeons. One of my clients, in the late 1980's, was a neurosurgery group preparing to develop a multi-specialty clinic. They invited me to come to their national meeting in Washington, D.C., because they wanted me to meet some of the vendors with whom our company would be dealing and some of their colleagues who were undertaking similar projects. The first evening, as I sat with them in the lounge looking through the program, the senior partner told me I should not miss one particular session of the conference. It was a medical session, I protested, and I'm not a neurosurgeon. Why would I want to go to that? He explained that the speaker was a world-famous neurosurgeon delivering what everyone assumed to be his very last address to his fellows, since he was in the end stages of terminal cancer. My client asked me to come just to "witness a moment of neurosurgical history" that meant a lot to him. So, the next afternoon, we sat in a packed ballroom as the famed man took the stage.

"I thought for a long time about what to tell you today," the speaker began. "I decided to show you my 10 worst cases." For the next two hours, he showed slides and described the mysteries, surprises, and disappointments in difficult cases that had gone terribly wrong. He still had not discovered why many of these patients had died. The cases were filled with unknowns, for which he was not providing answers, but opening up numerous questions. When his session ended, there was much discussion among the doctors in the group about what he had chosen to do for his swansong. It was quite controversial.

It changed my life, though. I had gone to the session out of respect for my clients and curiosity about what mattered to them professionally, with no expectations and nothing in particular on my mind. I was under no pressure to learn anything. I couldn't have taken notes; I could not even have spelled the words. Yet, afterwards, I realized it was the first national meeting I had ever attended that left me feeling I had learned something of tremendous and lasting value. It has stayed with me ever since. Whenever I recall it, the value seems to increase.

I saw how our thinking works for us. Insights poured through me. People can fearlessly look at mistakes in order to understand things better. Exploring questions – facing the unknown – creates the opportunity to learn. Even “great” experts who are famous for the dazzling technology they have developed don’t know everything about their work and will go to their graves with questions unanswered and mysteries unsolved. In looking at mysteries, one never knows what might come to mind. It is possible to learn from anything, and it can happen when you’re least expecting it.

Here is the practical, useful part. Once I began to understand that knowledge arising from insight is invaluable, my way of going about everything changed completely. Instead of scrambling to accumulate the biggest and best pile of information every chance I got, I began to wonder what was truly important and follow my own wisdom. It seemed increasingly clear to me that unless an idea arose from within my own mind at an opportune moment, it probably wasn’t going to help me to write it down and re-read it later. As I took the pressure off myself to figure out who had the best ideas and then borrow, beg or steal them, pressure diminished all around me. I started looking for ways to draw new ideas from thoughtful interaction with others, rather than pushing to keep getting more data about existing ideas.

The next time I went to a meeting, I returned with just a few notes. The notes consisted of things that had occurred to me as helpful to our company while I was at the meeting. Some of them appeared to have nothing to do with the meeting at all, but I wrote them down anyway because, when they came to mind, they were meaningful to me. I read materials that were interesting while I was there, but I left most of the materials behind when I packed. I returned to work rested. Instead of writing an obligatory memo, I simply sat down with a handful of people with whom it made sense to share some of the things that had come to mind.

Eventually, we went to far fewer meetings. We began to learn, as an organization, that our most precious resources were our own common sense and our own wisdom. Rather than sign up for something just because it was national or annual or highly touted, we would reflect to see what was really important. Sometimes, it would be a meeting. Other times, it would be something else. For example, one year instead of sending someone to a meeting, we spent the meeting money providing support for our employees to participate in the March of Dimes walkathon. That event was near to the hearts of many of our employees and the “problem” we were addressing that year was sustaining closeness and strong morale in a rapidly growing company. We found the walkathon inspiring and it seemed clear that the employees who brought forward the walkathon had already had a “best practice” idea.

One by one, we changed direction and fostered our intention to understand the inside-out nature of the learning experience. Month by month, our organization became more calm, more confident, more productive, more willing to embrace the unknown with hope and

faith that we would get good ideas for ourselves. We learned to appreciate brilliance in others without being intimidated by it. When we studied others' ideas, we weren't looking to adopt them whole and expect the same results; we were looking to consider what was behind them, why they worked, what kinds of questions people had asked to move their minds in the direction of those ideas.

Traveling in this new direction set the power of our imaginations free, without in any way limiting our ability to use information.

As I talked to the executive who asked me the question recently, I felt grateful to be able to describe how thrilling this always is. Not long ago, as an example, I facilitated a meeting about insight and the power of each person's own capacity to think. Immediately afterward, attendees were invited to stay and enjoy some snacks and drinks. As I walked among the participants and joined various conversations, I was struck by the quality of the discussions. People were brimming with ideas. They were surprised, engaged and fascinated by each other's ideas. The ideas were inspiring, relevant and obvious to those who had them.

Most importantly, no one in the group was thanking me for the skills, or the technology, or the information I had given them. People were just thankful that somehow, during this meeting, the floodgates of their own powerful imaginations opened and they awakened to their own unlimited ability to think for themselves. In essence, they were expressing appreciation for re-discovering a treasure always available, but sometimes forgotten.

©Judith A. Sedgeman, EdD  
[jsedgeman@mac.com](mailto:jsedgeman@mac.com)