

Hello. This is Wayne Rivers at The Family Business Institute. Thank you for participating in our blog. We appreciate that. Several things: give us the benefit of your thinking in the comments, please click on our social media icons, and don't forget, Boot Camp Delta. So, contact Charlotte about that.

All right, so this week I want to talk about Dwight D. Eisenhower, common sense, and leadership. And there's a great story ... I've always been intrigued with this story. It may or may not be true. I've read disputed accounts of whether or not this story is true or not, but it's a great story. It's about Ike when he was president of Columbia University, prior to being president of the United States.

Now, why is this important? Why am I talking about an old dead president, and Columbia University, and all this other stuff? Because it illustrates good, old fashioned common sense. But even more importantly, it illustrates some good points about leadership.

So, the story is this: they were doing a lot of expansion at Columbia, post-World War II, and the designers were arguing about where to pour the sidewalks around the new part of the campus. And man, they had this big bicker going on, and Eisenhower was sitting in his office, and he sort of calmly said, "Well, why don't we not pour any sidewalks? We'll grow grass, and we'll let the students go where they will, and then once we know what the pathways are a year later, then you can come in and pour the concrete where they've already trod down the grass. We'll know, in other words, if we just let people guide us."

I think it's a great story. It illustrates several things. Number one, the wisdom of crowds. We talked about that book in a blog about a year ago. People collectively are smarter than people as individuals, and Ike instinctively, with his Kansas common sense, just knew that.

The second things it illustrates is a form of spontaneous order, because people don't need to be told how to get from point A to point B. They can figure it out on their own, and if they're working in groups, they can influence each other. So, there it is: instead of needing concrete to tell me where to go, I'll go where the group goes. I'll go where my common sense tells me to go, how to get from point A to point B.

The third thing it illustrates, and this is key, and that is the simple wrong-headedness of dictating where other people should go. It does not work. People are going to go in their own direction. You've got to find a way to corral that energy within your own organization, within your own values, and within your own culture. But people can't be directed. They can't be dictated to. They don't like that. We're human beings, and in America at least, we seek freedom. And being imposed on by some higher power is just somehow anathema to us, and it doesn't really work very well.

The fourth thing it illustrates is the value of watching and listening to other people to guide you in your leadership. There are several examples. Manufacturers. The manufacturers of scientific instruments and medical instruments don't usually come up with innovation. Scientists and doctors do. They know what they need to perform a certain task, or to analyze a certain problem. So, they inform the manufacturers, who then turn around and produce the products.

Electrolyte sports drinks, I bet every one of you has some Gatorade in your office refrigerator somewhere, that didn't come from soft drink manufacturers or beverage makers. It came from the University of Florida football team. They would

get so dehydrated in the Florida heat and humidity, they needed a better way to replenish themselves, and they more or less invented Gatorade, which is now a multibillion-dollar industry of its own.

Windsurfers. Windsurfers would hit waves and go up in the air, and as soon as they hit the water their feet would come off the board and they would fall over. So, they fixed foot straps to their boards so ... Snowboarders use these today. And they came up with that innovation. The manufacturers copied them.

So, there's a value in watching and listening to others who actually put their hands on things, projects and procedures, and use them, and letting them help design. Let them inform the process so you get the optimal design.

So, where does this apply to you? I can tell you one way it applied to us: I went to a client's office, and they had this open-concept. It was so cool! It was so beautifully designed. It was so modern. I came back all enthusiastic, and I wanted to tear all the walls out of our building and just have this open-concept, so we'd have complete open collaboration. And almost immediately I started to get signals from my team that that wasn't going to fly. I was getting emails with articles attached, explaining why open-concept is a bad idea. I actually took a tour of one of my peer group member's office where they had dozens of noise makers at the top of their cubicles in their open-concept, and everybody pretty much hated it. So, I learned right away that my idea to try to impose this open-concept workspace on everybody was a horrible idea. It took no time for my group to tell me.

And that's a sample. If you're thinking about changes in your office, changes to procedures, changes to systems in your company, let those ideas be directed by the people that are actually going to use them. In your project planning, let those projects be designed by the people that have to execute the projects. Let them inform you, rather than dictating how things are going to get done.

And finally, as you think about the big picture, your business plan, your culture, your values, all of that, let that bubble up from other people in the organization, rather than imposing it on them. It'll just work so much better. It's so much more organic. And I've found it here just to be easy. I don't have to sit around and try to dream up what our culture is. I just let our folks inform me what our culture is, and that seems to work much better. And of course, if we're going in the wrong direction, I have a problem. But so far, so good.

Your leadership will improve if you allow other people to participate in the way you think, the way you act, and the way you make decisions. That's our blog for this week. I'd love to have your comments. I'm sure there's some disagreement among you.

This is Wayne Rivers at The Family Business Institute. Thank you.