

TAKE CARE OF THE CANARY

... AND OTHER CHALLENGING OBSERVATIONS FOR INTERESTING TIMES

Stephen Lundin (aka The Big Tuna)

In a recent closing keynote, in front of a large group of HR professionals, I sought to provoke those assembled with a few challenges. Following are a few of those things that still stand out for me today. As we move forward into a year of rebuilding, I hope you are as challenged by these observations as I am...

It is up to everyone to take care of the canary

In the old days, when miners would go deep underground, they would bring along a canary. If the canary flopped over dead, it was a sign the air might be toxic and a reason to boogie out fast.

We are all well aware that the climate in our organisation can have a big effect on the quality of the operations and the lives of the people. We all carry the canary, especially the HR teams, and we are the first to notice when the internal climate turns bad. As keepers of the canary and the enemy of toxic energy, a key part of our role is to see that the canary not only stays alive but also thrives. Some have found that the ingredients in the FISH! Philosophy contain important nutrients for a high quality of work-life and a healthy canary.

Work-life balance is not a physics problem

I have been troubled by the industry that has developed around work-life balance. I admire the mission of work-life balance, to help us lead a well-rounded life in a world full of work addiction. The excuse for the addiction is often economical; but it is my observation that people addicted to work are not usually more productive, nor are they more successful. The addiction is like all addictions. It is a way to hide from the natural and intense feeling of life. So creating a model that makes this a physics problem is not really addressing the core issue. As would have it my travels with fish provided me with some insights. Well, actually it was a personal tragedy combined with my FISH travels.

On November 12, 2001, my oldest child, Beth Ann Lundin, was killed by a drunk driver. Some months later, I made the observation that I was now her legacy. Where we expect to be our parent's legacy, I was my daughter's legacy and I was now living for both of us. And one day I heard the words coming out of my mouth before I was aware of their presence. "It is not about work-life balance because it is all life and all meant to be lived fully. Life at work and life outside of work, all to be honoured. And the shorthand of the FISH! Philosophy is not a bad reminder of what is entailed if one chooses to live life at work in a way that honours life itself. Remember, life is too precious to just be passing through." This is Beth's legacy.

Truth telling is hard, but better than the alternative

An organisation is run by folks who are both political and strategic. It is a place where the words hard and soft are used to hide the fact that the opposite is true. Most of us deal with people and people have emotions, an ingredient in the human equation that many with

primarily linear and strategic minds find quite disquieting. Since our leaders are often selected for their strategic mind, it is common for our work to be considered a necessary evil that is not fully understood. The truth is that many of these leaders are terrified of the authentic human engagement and would rather avoid the fierce conversations that are required to keep the toxicity out of the climate.

In my travels with FISH! I often get the following question: "But what about those people who actually seem dedicated to their negativity? You know the ones who can find something bad in anything and have permanently scrunched up faces. How do you get them to adopt the FISH! Philosophy?"

My first response is to clarify, "Is their negativity affecting the performance of the organisation or the quality of work-life? Could what you see as negativity actually be an individual difference or a legitimate disagreement or difference of opinion? If either of these let them be, not everyone has to FISH! FISH! must always be a choice."

And 95% of the time the person who asked the question will tell me that the quality of work-life is negatively affected and productivity suffers and I then say, "Why have you done nothing about this?" The awkward silence is an indication that the soft is really very hard.

We all need to be the truth tellers, especially if you are a leader. Or, often, the truth will not be told. When confronted with negativity in the form of passive resistance or any of its other insidious forms, we have to advise our colleagues of the following sequence:

1. Compassion. Be fully present with the negative person and take the time needed to be sure they know you are really listening.
2. Confrontation. If the compassionate approach leads nowhere confront the person with the impact of their negativity in your view and ask them to stop.
3. Say goodbye. If the first two steps do not lead to a change, the human thing to do is say goodbye. Many find my use of the word human in this context hard to understand. How can it be human to fire someone? Think for a minute, this is a critical message we must convey to our colleagues if we wish to eliminate the toxic energy dumps of our organisation. This person has been saying over and over again, "I am unhappy here. I am unhappy here." Acknowledging that is hard but essential. Sometimes the soft is hard and the hard is soft.

Find and harness natural energy

Perhaps the biggest surprise I have encountered with FISH! is the number of leaders who like the results they see in the film, book or case studies and want the same result today. By simply dictating that it will be so. Liking the result of having a workforce that engages customers and colleagues in authentic and inspiring ways I can understand. But wanting to dictate that result shows an amazing lack of understanding of human beings. "I want 50% more FISH! by Friday." Sorry, doesn't work that way.

My colleague, Carr Hagerman, and I have focused on the ingredient that fuels the result and have come to call it natural energy. In fact, we wrote the book *Top Performer* and made the film by the same name to help communicate the power of this renewable resource.

It all boils down to the fact that the authentic human connection is always a result of individual choice. If you want a customer experience that rings real, you can't demand it, coerce it or force it, you have to invite it, inspire it, model it and support it. A very different

way of thinking and yet the most amazing and successful companies seem to find their way through the sea of egos and the waves of arrogance to the island called natural energy.

Understand the *real* role of freedom in the workplace

If I could pick or predict the next big business topic it would be 'freedom'. Isn't it interesting that one of the last institutions to embrace freedom is the organisation? Interesting but not surprising. Freedom is frightening to those who cherish old-fashioned control. However, when you replace old-fashioned control with distributed control, the result can be an explosion of energy and innovation. And what better name for distributed control than the value nested inside - freedom. (Yes, we tried empowerment but it became a tool that could be given and taken away. You can give freedom, and you can set people free; and that cannot be taken away or it isn't really freedom.)

Freedom is a universal value that has not been at all welcome in most enterprises. Its time has come and it is up to us to work out the details and smooth the worried brows of executives who have lived their whole life in relying on position power. Remember the words of the Rat Catcher in *Top Performer*, "There is nothing so compelling as to witness someone who is truly free." If natural energy is a renewable resource then we are wildcatters drilling for freedom.

The big story is no longer the fish market in Seattle, it's in your office

If Pike Place Fishmarket in Seattle, US, were lost in an earthquake tomorrow it would be a terrible loss but the FISH! Phenomenon would not miss a beat. All over the world, people have been provoked by the story of the market and taken action on their own; discovering ways to bring the old wisdom contained in the FISH! Philosophy to their workplaces. I have heard hundreds of inspiring stories about the actions of these pioneers including a nursing home in New Zealand, an insurance company in South Africa, an oil platform in the North Sea, a bank in Malaysia, the military in Australia, a supermarket chain in Thailand and a hospital in Singapore. And in the centre of each story is someone leading or supporting the change.

In some ways you might consider this phenomenon the largest business experiment of our time. And it is a natural experiment. By natural, I mean, no-one is in charge; it is simply moving across the globe by word of mouth. It is people like you who have been inspired to their personal possibilities after considering the amazing story of a rag tag group of fishmongers in Seattle. If the market disappeared tomorrow, there would be no shortage of equally powerful stories.

Stephen Lundin, the Big Tuna, PhD is the author of seven books and producer of a number of films. He personally wrote FISH!, FISH! Sticks and FISH! for Life. He was co-writer of FISH! Tales and co-author of Top Performer: A Bold Approach to Sales and Service with Carr Hagerman. His books CATS: The Nine Lives of Innovation and CATS: The Personal Guide will be published in Australia in September 2007 and featured at the Druker Conference conducted by the Australian Institute of Management in Sydney. His latest film is Top Performer, which features business lessons from street performers in an environment of natural energy and lots of laughs.