

## EMPTY VESSELS MAKE LEAST NOISE

One of my colleagues appeared slightly unnerved (in this case a euphemism for bloody pissed off) this week by a remark from a visiting consultant. "Apparently I am an empty cup at HRMC" she complained, not realising that by referring to her as such, the consultant had in fact been paying her a huge compliment.

Here's the deal. You've heard the expression that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing but it's just as true that quite a lot isn't always much of an improvement. It's a case of the more you know, the less you know you know. And it follows suit that the less you know, the more you think you know. So whilst the thought of being called an empty cup may conjure up an image of Paris Hilton-type empty-headedness, the metaphor is taken from a well-known Zen story about a visitor who came to the Buddhist monastery saying he wanted to learn more about Zen. The visitor was full of 'knowledge' and continually interrupted his Zen master, going on about how he had been taught and what he himself had mastered. After a time, the master invited the visitor to have tea. As the master performed the ritual tea ceremony, he began filling the visitor's cup until it was full, then he kept on pouring until it was overflowing. The visitor rose to his feet, incredulous. "Don't you see it's full?" he said. "You can't get any more in!" "Just so," replied the Zen master, stopping at last. "And like this cup, you are filled with your own ideas. How can you expect me to give you Zen unless you offer me an empty cup?"

Like the visitor we are often so full of own ideas, opinions and experiences that we are not open to new ideas and ways of doing things. Our cups are overflowing so there is no room for new learning. When your mind is full – there is no room for anything else – and that's a recipe for disaster in business. How many times have you made a compelling motivation to improve a system or process at work or just proposed a great idea?. Your evidence and arguments were on the mark and you dissolved and dismantled the other person's concerns and objections. Yet it made no difference because none of it got through. Why? He had a closed mind. His cup was full. And as long as the mind is closed, the person is unreachable and unteachable.

Like it or not, doing things differently is the only way you can make progress. Sticking to the same will only give you more of the same and if it's not good enough now, how's it ever going to be? But to be willing to experiment with new ideas you need to get rid of all the stuff that you currently know so there's room for new thoughts, new ideas, By emptying the cup you open the mind.

But that's easier said than done. The reason we hold on to what we know is because we value the familiar. We value our experiences because often we allow that to define who we are. We feel secure with what we know – it validates us. And that's the problem cos if we have to empty our cup we are effectively sacrificing some of what we know for new knowledge and the in-between of that place which could be called 'knowledge no-man's-land', a scary place to be. But you have to move forward. Just like the sign in the doctor's surgery that said "Resisting change is like holding your breath; if you succeed, you die", people who don't, won't or can't change are headed for failure – eventually.

Most of us will do almost anything to guard against looking stupid. At all costs we must appear in control. It's the I-must-know-everything syndrome. The I-must-be-right axiom. The I-must-win-every-time law. The I-know-more-than-them-so-I-am-responsible-for-everything jeopardy. The I-can't-afford-to-empty-my-cup-because-then-I-will-have-nothing insurance policy. Well, nothing except the opportunity to open up to other inputs.

All of us have fears of failure and inadequacy—fear of rejection, fear of looking stupid, fear of not being good enough. Whether we are coach, manager, counsellor, sales representative, parent, teacher, or consultant, we all suffer from these fears from time to time. So to guard against potential failure we fall back on the familiar. We allow our fears to become a self-imposed barrier against the possibility of us entertaining new ideas, new visions, new rules. It's not easy opening yourself up, taking a chance that may result in you looking like an idiot. Lets face it, such vulnerability is uncomfortable. There's a possibility you might end up looking like a complete fool but ultimate success depends on being prepared to take that risk. When Sol Kerzner stood with his financial advisor in dusty Bopuphutswana and described his vision of a Sun City there in the semi-desert, he certainly must have sounded a bit half-baked. Of course the rest is history. But that's the thing with emptying the cup. Kerzner refused to see the problems of infrastructure, resources etc and opened himself up to the possibilities – ones that with a full cup would be impossible to even contemplate.

Similarly the 263<sup>rd</sup> richest person in the world, Richard Branson, sees opportunity where others see potential disaster. The visionary founder of Virgin Group has business interests on six continents, including airlines, express trains,, limousine services, retail stores and now he even has his sights set on the final frontier - space. All done when others thought it wouldn't work. Just like Sol Kerzner, his financial controllers probably thought he was half-mad, half the time. They were half right. He refuses to be half-hearted, he's never in half a mind but he's always half a cup – he makes sure he leaves room for more projects more knowledge, more great ideas. We've had Branson's autobiography, 'Losing My Virginity' and his business philosophy manual 'Screw It, Let's Do It'. Perhaps his next book ought to be entitled 'Zen and the Art of Motivation Maintenance'!

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