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Check Your Blind Spot:
Tips for Growth-oriented CEOs
and Their Leadership Team

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WATCH OUT!

Downturns in the economy don't just *happen*. There are plenty of warning signs. The same thing can be said for any other obstacle your company may face.

If you were able to spot these challenges in advance, it would be a game changer.

For most of us, these obstacles remain hidden in our various blind spots. By the time one is spotted, it's far too late to course correct.

Sure, you can blame the obstacle for the crash, but it's never that simple. A lack of awareness and preparation often puts you in the way of danger, yet people always leave things up to fate.

As a leader, you should always be asking yourself, "What am I doing to avoid an accident?"

For many executives, the main objective is to steer clear of catastrophic failure. If money is being made and people are happy, they kick back and relax.

On the other hand, smart leaders recognize opportunity. Good times can be used to work towards future success. The idea of growth and development should be a never-ending motivator.

In the 2020s, change happens quickly. A company can thrive one day and collapse the next. If you want to survive, you need to be plugged in 24/7.

It's time to lean into that challenge. Here's how you can stay on top.

Finding Your Focus

As a leader, everyone and everything is in a constant battle for your attention.

Multitasking is a big part of modern life, but in this case, practice hasn't made perfect. We aren't as great at it as we'd like to think.[1] Yet plenty of executives claim to be multitaskers and believe that they're able to handle various information streams in a way that others can't.

This isn't to say that you aren't motivated or intelligent. It's just that the human body, from a purely scientific perspective, isn't built for multitasking. Even the brightest among us can't successfully juggle multiple objectives concurrently.

Time and time again, psychological studies have shown that individuals who multitask take longer to complete their tasks and often do so with more errors. The human mind lacks the architecture to successfully multitask, yet many CEOs consider the loss of focus a necessary trade-off in terms of managing their productivity.

To do so is to interfere with the brain's control network, yet many CEOs consider the loss of focus a necessary evil in terms of managing their productivity.

A common excuse I hear is that there just aren't enough hours in the day to focus on one task at a time. The people who believe this platitude are often held hostage by the messiness of their own schedule.

You should never forget that you're in control of your calendar, not the other way around. If your agenda is jam-packed with meetings, that's definitely where the cuts should begin.

Meeting exhaustion is real, and most likely, it's affecting you. The time spent in meetings per person has been steadily increasing for over a decade, and the further you go up the chain of command, the worse the problem gets.[2]

A good meeting should be concise, well planned, and lacking in unnecessary attendees. Anything else is a waste of time and effort. When in doubt, think of meetings in terms of man hours.

Let's say you have a department-wide gathering that goes for half an hour. That may seem like a small price to pay to share pertinent information across the group, but it adds up. If your department is made up of 50 individuals, you've just collectively wasted 25 hours.

Is any decision made within that 30-minute window worthwhile?

[1] Madore KP, Wagner AD. Multicosts of Multitasking. Cerebrum. 2019 Apr 1.
[2] Chen, Chang. "Shocking Meeting Statistics In 2021 That Will Take You By Surprise." Otter.Ai, 24 Dec. 2020, otter.ai/blog/meeting-statistics.

Another common time waster for leaders comes in the form of trying to manage day-to-day operations. Executives that lack faith in their management team often become mired in micromanagement, taking a personal stake in every little decision.

This urge to seek control is natural. After all, you're the one in charge. At the same time, you put your team together, and they should be qualified enough to take on pesky daily tasks for you.

If you don't believe your management team can handle such decisions, it's good to zero in on why. First and foremost, always give them the benefit of the doubt. Consider whether or not the standards you're setting for them are reasonable.

We all have our personal insecurities, and sometimes, solving the issue is as simple as stepping back and letting things function as intended.

As a member of the C-suite, your focus shouldn't be on internal issues. Instead, your valuable time should be spent on those "big picture" initiatives that build a company up.[3]

Strategically mapping out objectives and goals is a worthwhile effort that can only be guided by a leader's perspective. You may need a fundamental understanding of internal operations to do so, but it's the holistic approach that will keep you ahead of the curve.

Such an approach requires focus, attention, and most importantly, time. If you're going from meeting to meeting or task to task, you aren't going to be able to zero in on those integral values that shape a company's vision.

From another point of view, schedules with more breathing room also give you the freedom to emphasize personal growth through learning, which is a skill in and of itself.
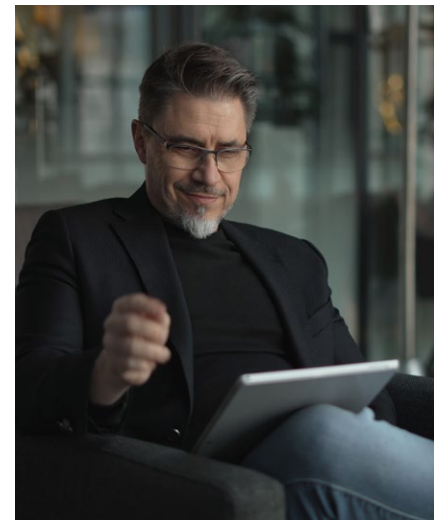
"Allocate your time thoughtfully; don't become a victim of your calendar. Carve out time to read, research, and think."

— David Cote, Former CEO of Honeywell and Author of *Winning Now, Winning Later: How Companies Can Succeed in the Short Term While Investing for the Long Term*

The time that you spend obtaining and applying new pieces of knowledge are of the utmost importance. Whether you're thinking about your business or something else entirely, there is much to be gained from personal enrichment.

This process of learning for the sake of learning, also known as continuous learning, is a key factor in driving performance.[4] Continuous learners are known for their innovative thinking and leadership style. If knowledge is power, continuous learners have the competitive advantage.

3. Caldbeck, Ryan. "When Should a CEO Get Involved in Day-to-Day Details?" *Entrepreneur,* Entrepreneur, 16 June 2014, www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/when-should-a-ceo-get-involved-in-day-to-day-details/234643.
4. Andreev, Ivan. "What Is Continuous Learning? Its Importance & Benefits." Valamis, Valamis, 18 June 2023, www.valamis.com/hub/continuous-learning.

The Power of Diagnosis

As a leader, it's essential to dig deeper.

If you think an issue has an easy solution, you're probably solving the wrong problem. Businesses have a bad habit of mistaking a symptom for a root cause and slapping a band-aid on a full-sized wound.

Because of this, problem solving often turns into a futile game of whac-a-mole. The solution to one issue simply yields another. If you want to fix something once and for all, identify the underlying issue.

This technique, sometimes called Root Cause Analysis, helps you to answer three questions.[5]

1. What happened?

2. Why did it happen?

3. What can we do to reduce the likelihood of it happening again?

And remember, time is of the essence. Problems need to be addressed quickly. If they aren't, another company will gladly pick up the slack.

You're not looking to be outflanked, and there are plenty of things an executive can do to become a more effective problem solver.

At the core of diagnosis lies understanding. If you're looking to better recognize and more quickly solve your company's biggest problems, a solid sense of comprehension is required. You should always be asking yourself, "Do I understand?"

To better improve your sense of understanding, consider the Cone of Experience. Developed by Edgar Dale, a 20th-century educational researcher, the cone illustrates the importance of various experiences in the continuity of learning.[6]

At the top of the cone, you'll find the most abstract methods of learning, such as reading about something or hearing about it secondhand. Near the bottom of the cone are more concrete methods of learning. Firsthand experiences, such as simulating a model or participating in a workshop fit there.

It's important to note that the cone is not meant to be a sorted ranking of learning methods. By definition, the items at the tip are not explicitly less
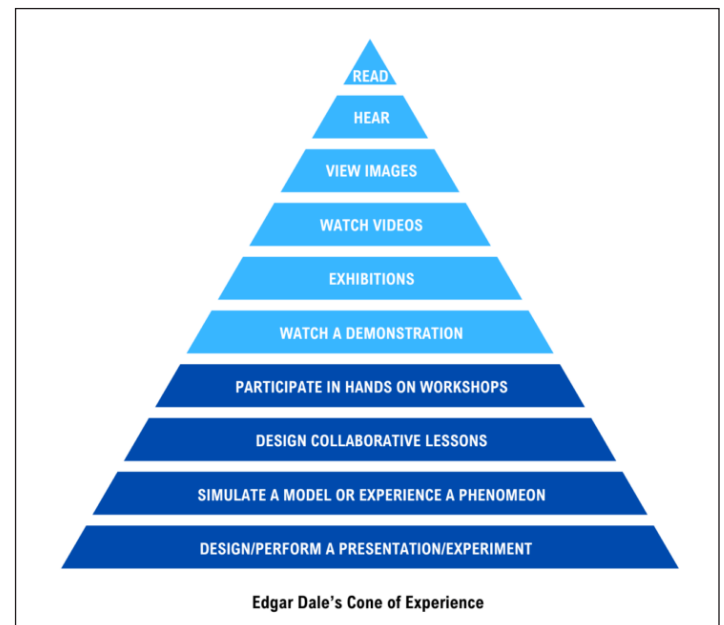

Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience

PHOTO CREDIT: https://www.xpotential.co.uk/the-power-of-active-listening-5-tips-for-better-understanding-and-connection/

[5] Mind Tools Content Team. "Root Cause Analysis." *Mind Tools*, www.mindtools.com/ag6pkn9/root-cause-analysis.

[6] Cloke, Harry. "Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience: A Comprehensive Guide." *Growth Engineering*, 1 June 2023, www.growthengineering.co.uk/what-is-edgar-dales-cone-of-experience/.

impactful than the ones at the base. Instead, Dale's goal is to illustrate the various opportunities for learning across a broad spectrum of experiences.

For our sake, let's assume that direct questioning lies somewhere near the top of the pyramid. If you want to increase your capability for learning through conversation, finding ways to be more directly engaged in your conversations would be helpful.

Questions, for example, are an important step in improving your approach to problem solving. At its core, a question provides information, but that doesn't mean you'll get everything you want out of just one.

The best questions open up a continued dialogue. To get to the heart of an issue, you may require an entire line of questioning.

This is where the "5xy" approach comes into play. It's a form of questioning that utilizes clarification to progressively zero in on an issue as a conversation continues. By the end of using the "5xy" approach, you should have the essence of your topic.

The following is an example of the "5xy" approach as used by the CEO of a manufacturing company:

The Original Question:
How can we enhance our overall production efficiency?

Follow-up #1: What steps have we taken to optimize our production processes in the last quarter?

Follow-up #2: How has the recent introduction of automation technology into our facilities affected production efficiency?

Follow-up #3: Have we provided adequate workforce training to the employees that interact with our newly-introduced automation technology?

Follow-up #4: What programs could we implement to better introduce employees to automation technology?

In that example, the question asked at the beginning was very vague. Production efficiency is driven by multiple factors, and a specific problem could not be reasonably identified based on the original observation.

As more specific questions were asked, the real issue was revealed. The recent introduction of automation technology into this company's facilities seems to have been poorly executed, with a lack of workforce training in particular causing missteps during production.

What sets the last question apart is that it's well defined and implies reasonably specific steps or actions that could be taken to solve the problem.

We all know that information is king. Knowing the ins and outs of an issue allows you to better address it. At the same time, where your information is coming from is just as important.

A problem doesn't look the same for everyone, so neither will a solution. Building up a pool of diverse

perspectives will allow you to better understand and approach an issue from various angles.

The opposite is also true. The disadvantages of groupthink are well known, but that doesn't stop executives from falling for it time and time again. Whether we like it or not, we find comfort in familiarity, and it often leads us astray.

If you're looking for new sources of information, you have some options.

To start, it's good to have peers that aren't a part of your company or industry. Their experiences won't always be transferable, but you may be surprised at just how much of their general knowledge is.

Incorporating these unique viewpoints into your decision-making process will help to plug various leaks in your business model. After all, at their core, most businesses share the same goals, and a new line of thinking can go a long way.

Your customers are another important source of information. In situations where they're displeased, it can be easy to shoot the messenger. Their high standards are a blessing though, not a curse.

By meeting them where they are and encouraging them to provide their thoughts and recommendations, you can build a powerful source of feedback that pushes your company forward.[7] A loyal customer base can be used to develop a friendly rapport that provides much more than profit.

This, in part, is why lead user research is so central to innovation.[8] By better identifying the likes and dislikes of your customer base, you can fuel further growth that defies conventional industry wisdom. Think Apple and the iPhone or Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook.

> *"Capture user innovation, then commercialize it ... Produce the things they specifically want."*
>
> — Eric von Hippel, Professor of Technological Innovation in the MIT Sloan School of Management

Without customer input, the best you can do is make blind assumptions. And you know what they say about people who assume...

7. Bernazzani, Sophia. "Why (& How) You Should Actually Listen to Your Customers." *HubSpot*, 15 June 2021, blog.hubspot.com/service/listening-to-customers.
8. Harvard Management Update. "Let the Users Take the Lead." Harvard Business Review, 7 Aug. 2014, hbr.org/2008/02/let-the-users-take-the-lead.

Embracing Accountability and Mastering Execution

As a leader, you set the tone.

An accountable workplace is one that pushes everyone towards improvement, and that starts at the top.

Culture trickles down. For many businesses, a choice is made between harmony and progress. Either everyone likes each other, or everyone moves forward. Strike a balance by surrounding yourself with valuable employees that are worth the fuss.

Post-COVID, retention is a hot-button issue. It can be easy to pamper the entire workplace with perks and an easy-going attitude in the hopes of getting them to stick around. Tolerating non-performance for the sake of keeping people on the payroll though is a nonstarter.

There's some merit to that old adage, "Work hard, play hard." Empower your employees to earn their keep. Any bonus or benefit they receive should be on a transactional basis.

Shifting to the C-suite perspective, accountability can have major consequences. If you're cherry picking data to paint an overly optimistic picture of your business, you may be engaging in "success theater."

You wouldn't be alone. Even the world's most well-known CEOs have succumbed to it.[9]

Jeff Immelt, the former CEO of General Electric, hated bad news and especially hated giving it to the board. This mindset trickled down, creating a culture flush with unreachable financial targets and decisions made based on public perception.

The meaningless positivity constantly proclaimed by GE disguised the truth. The company was bloated and rotting from the inside out.

"Success theater" only works for so long. Immelt made it out of GE alive, but the company nearly collapsed upon his exit. Whether he likes it or not, that will be his legacy.

Immelt had shortcomings, but that isn't an instant "Game Over".

He could have built up a team that counteracted his flaws. Instead, he surrounded himself with people who were just as oblivious to the truth as he was. In ignoring his weaknesses, he only emphasized them for the world at large.

This story isn't meant to scare you as much as it is to deter you. Don't undermine yourself. Engage in realism, not make believe.

9. Gryta, Thomas, et al. "How Jeffrey Immelt's 'Success Theater' Masked the Rot at GE." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 22 Feb. 2018, www.wsj.com/articles/how-jeffrey-immelts-success-theater-masked-the-rot-at-ge-1519231067.

A leader should be able to handle failure gracefully. Your job doesn't end when bad news walks through the door. Seeing you weather the storm will encourage those under you to do the same. Embracing hardship is part of any job, but as a leader, it's a major part of yours.

> *"Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently."*
>
> — Eric von Hippel, Professor of Technological Innovation in the MIT Sloan School of Management

On the other end of the spectrum, it's important to note that accountability is not driven by authoritarian vigilance. Respecting your employees' right to autonomy, success, and yes, even failure, will strengthen your company overall.

Take performance reports for example. What are you rating people on? If your list is a mile long, you might be missing the forest for the trees.

Determine what is crucial to a job or position, and let that shape your report. Scoring people on too many things is convoluted and impractical.

If you're looking for a good rule of thumb, keep performance reviews under two pages long. They'll be easy to write, easy to understand, and much more useful.

How you interact with employees is also important. Communication is such an important skill, but for many, it takes a back seat to logic-based competencies.

One way to improve your communication is by practicing active listening. This holistic methodology keeps both the speaker and listener actively engaged before, during, and after a conversation.

An active listener would make sure to do the following during an important one-on-one:

Before the Conversation: Prepare themselves to listen. This includes showing the speaker respect and establishing a non-judgmental environment for the conversation.

During the Conversation: Avoid interruptions and criticism while the speaker is making their points. Continue to show focus by providing proper feedback through body language and eye contact.

After the Conversation: Restate the key themes, as understood, to the speaker. Have the speaker confirm their intent, and ask questions about anything that could be considered ambiguous or unclear.

Remember that you can be a leader and a team player. It can be easy to take a strictly offensive or defensive approach to management, but the best of the best know which plays to call and when.

Try to be "care-frontational." Difficult conversations require both toughness and fairness. If you can strike that balance, your employees will remain loyal to your leadership, vision, and goals.

10. Leading Effectively Staff. "What Is Active Listening?" *Center for Creative Leadership*, 2 Sept. 2023, www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/coaching-others-use-active-listening-skills/.

Once a set of practices have been established though, it doesn't mean you're out of the woods.

So much planning and emphasis is put on determining what the outcome of a certain scenario should be. Yet when the time comes to act, failure to follow through is a common occurrence. This is even true on a company-wide scale.

People tend to only think of a goal as a final outcome. They forget about the various steps and processes in between that get you to that final point.

When finding a solution to a problem, one researches the issue, gathers different perspectives, and thinks of various ways that the problem could be addressed.

The same level of detail should be given to creating a thorough goal. Similar checkpoints should be put in place to keep the odds of success high. A successful objective should have a clear finish line and be thoroughly subtasked.

For better-planned goals, I recommend the SMART technique.[11]

SMART Goals Are:

Specific: Well defined, clear, and unambiguous.

Measurable: With specific criteria that measure your progress toward the accomplishment of the goal.

Achievable: Attainable and not impossible to achieve.

Realistic: Within reach, realistic, and relevant to your purpose.

Timely: With a clearly defined timeline, including a starting date and a target date. The purpose is to create urgency.

Another way to create strong and meaningful goals is by embracing "future-back" thinking, also known as

backcasting.[12] Envision the breakthrough you want to achieve and then create initiatives that work towards it.

Whether this is bringing in young minds or putting a heavy emphasis on R&D, future-back thinkers are often our greatest visionaries.

They don't build their processes on what works today; they build them on what will work ten-to-twenty years from now. Their competitive advantage are things their competitors have yet to even think of.

Most people engage in "present-forward" thinking. They use the information they currently have at their disposal to determine their next steps.

If the environment or situation changes, present-forward thinkers are often left in the lurch. If they need to toss their data or roadmap, they'll be starting at square one.

The power of positivity is frequently touted, but future-back thinking adds much needed depth to the concept. You're not simply imagining good things happening. You're willing them into existence through thorough methodology and zeroed-in execution.

By combining the concept of future-back thinking and SMART goals, success is in reach.

11. Boogaard, Kat. "How to Write SMART Goals." Work Life by Atlassian, 26 Dec. 2021, www.atlassian.com/blog/productivity/how-to-write-smart-goals.
12. Johnson, Mark W., and Roy N. Davis. "A Future-Back Approach to Creating Your Growth Strategy." Innosight, Feb. 2014, www.innosight.com/insight/a-future-back-approach-to-creating-your-growth-strategy/.

Challenges are opportunities for improvement.

This white paper has offered plenty of tips, but sometimes, a collision is just unavoidable. What's important is that you get back on the road.

Growth often stems from adversity, so whether you've stared down a few obstacles yourself or are just brushing up on road rules, keep what we've talked about in mind.

The business landscape is more dynamic than ever, and there's little room for complacency. Being a leader in today's world demands that we not only steer clear of failure but constantly pursue growth and opportunities.

Prepare yourself for warning signs and unveil those hidden obstacles by embracing the change. As you move forward, consider the strategies and insights I've presented.

Keep cruising. And when you take a turn, don't forget to check your blind spot.

About Richard Van Belzen

Problem solving is a common thread throughout Richard Van Belzen's life and career. Solution-driven first and foremost, he takes pride in his ability to analyze the facts and correctly diagnose any situation. He is well versed in the strategies, techniques and research that drive financial growth.

As the founder of Northpoint Business Advisors, Van Belzen has had the unique opportunity to work with numerous businesses across various industries. He is renowned for his ability to, time and time again, grow companies facing disruption and hardship. Hundreds of c-suite individuals have benefited from his unique form of client engagement, with many considering him one of North America's leading growth specialists.

When he's not consulting, Van Belzen keeps busy with various other activities. His hobbies include tennis, kayaking, and reading. He's also active on LinkedIn and would love to hear from you!

About Northpoint Business Advisors

The Northpoint Revenue Growth Commitment

You may be concerned about group think and need a fresh set of eyes to look at your project. Maybe you have a critical project but don't have enough bandwidth on your team to get started. Or maybe you're stuck on a tough problem and can't sort it out. In any case, Northpoint can help. We can be your trusted business advisor, and help you and your team achieve successful results...fast. That is the Northpoint promise.

Someone is always going to assess your strengths and vulnerabilities; it would be best if it was Northpoint and not your competition. Build your ideal program today, call **833-GROWREV (833.476.9738)** or email us at **info@northpointadvisors.com**.

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