

April 9, 2007

## Corporate aversion to change can cause business to stagnate

**BY ALISE ISBELL AND BONNIE HOCHSTEIN**  
SPECIAL TO HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Those who buy fresh fish know to look for a market that frequently turns over its inventory, one where the fish's eyes glimmer.

When it comes to sustaining life, people want freshness and rapid turnover. In business, however, people often think of change as a burden. Just about the time one masters a task or job, it changes. The newness tends to drain instead of sustain.

How do professionals control their careers and succeed? Some athletes understand that change is good, a philosophy that could be called "sustaining evolutionary performance." Golfer Tiger Woods, for example, constantly tries new swings or new grips, sometimes resulting in a temporary slump but hopefully ending with better results over the long term. One probably wouldn't find a rusted club or dented ball in his golf bag.

How can companies be encouraged to adopt the freshness mindset? Many corporate cultures promote the saying, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." But just like the fish market, the longer the fish stays unchanged, the worse it smells. Many workers stay mired in incompetence and don't even know it. Static companies grind the gears of progress

to a screeching halt while their competitors whiz by.

Evolutionary performance can and should be sustained in the workplace.

Ask questions. There are no dumb questions, only dumb people who stay ignorant of industry trends, technology or economic shifts. Employees should ask why they didn't get a promotion or raise, then brace themselves for the possibly brutal reality. They may be obsolete and not know it. Professionals should get the facts, swallow their pride and take an honest look at themselves. Then, develop a plan for digging out of a rut.

Become a lifelong learner. Learning shouldn't stop with a college degree. People didn't keep using typewriters just because they still worked. They moved on to computers and other devices to communicate and process work. Think evolution, not revolution. Taking courses, learning new skills and broadening one's mind will keep the world from passing by. Learning happens in many ways. Find them.

Never settle. Jim Collins in "Good to Great" talks about discipline and a relentless pursuit toward goals. Everyone should become like Tiger Woods, willing to fine-tune his or her game. Even those who already work productively should keep pushing for improved performance. Enhance processes, build or strengthen relationships with co-workers or design something new. Always drive forward.

Find some touchstones. In every workplace, there are lightning rods. Who gets attention? Who gets pro-

moted? Who gets kudos? Ask why. Get to know the golden people and what makes them effective. Sometimes their success stems from knowledge and skills. Sometimes their personality is aligned with the managers' philosophy or goals. Either way, knowing will lead to a better understanding of why they are successful.

Be a mentor. Teaching others is the best way to develop relationships and solidify learning. Helping people experience success creates lifelong bonds that increase teamwork and collaboration. Pay attention to learning opportunities, give graciously and trust that what goes around comes around.

Learn to live with growing pains. Those who learn new things or experiment with unfamiliar processes often fail a few times. This can hurt at first, but the new skills will be worth it. Evolution means adapting. The fittest person is not just the employee with the most degrees or plaques, but the person who gets the most work done with the fewest resources.

A famous quote by Louis Pasteur says, "Chance favors the prepared mind." Workers can avoid being the smelly fish in their organizations by staying fresh and alive, preparing themselves and leaving nothing to chance.

**ALISE ISBELL** is owner of Write Wise Communications LLC ([www.writewisecomunications.com](http://www.writewisecomunications.com)), which provides performance improvement services. **BONNIE HOCHSTEIN** is owner of BHochstein Consulting, which focuses on executive coaching, team facilitation and talent management.



**Isbell**