Teachable Moments

By Doug Williamson

Do you have an experience that defines your leadership style today?

Can you say the philosophy of the corporation you work for comes from a seminal event in its history?

If you can name or recount a story like this, then you have just identified a crucible moment.

Would you believe that these crucible moments are as important, if not more meaningful, to the culture and style of leadership at an organization than talent, ambition, market conditions or anything else?

It is one thing to identify these moments and assume they have an impact on leadership or decisions. But, the real challenge is to learn from these events and implement their lessons.

spotting crucibles of leadership isn’t easy in the first place!

The Fact is... you’re not born a leader. Your business career is littered with leadership moments. The problem is... there is no warning before these crucible experiences take place and there are important lessons to be drawn from each of these. How can a leader or his/her organization prepare?

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The Outcome is... that most leaders don’t leverage the full benefit of their experience and key moments in their career. This may be because they don’t know how to learn from these experiences and, sometimes, because they don’t even recognize them.

The Solution is... for leaders to identify and cultivate crucible moments, as they happen, in their careers, companies and industries. Push themselves into new territory. Take setbacks in stride and learn from them and even make the best use of unexpected downtime or lulls in activity.

Crucibles

Whether we’re talking about a company that’s an industry leader or a leader at a company, the concept of crucible moments is the same.

In Robert Thomas’ book “Crucibles of Leadership” he refers specifically to personal leadership moments.

It could be a moment where adversity forces a different approach to something or it could be a moment where your experimentation in new territory uncovers new ways of doing things. A crucible moment can be described as a transformation. An ordeal or test.

Robert Thomas would argue that your crucibles take place in three conditions:

- When you encounter new territory on the job.
- When you encounter a period of suspension. Things slow down and you have time to reflect.
- When you encounter a major setback in your career or personal life that causes disruption or loss.

These same crucibles apply to organizations in their ongoing quests to innovate.

Do you know the story of IKEA?

When IKEA faced competition from mail-order campaigns by other furniture companies, it created a showroom to appeal to the touch and feel needs of customers.
When a fire destroyed one of their showrooms, IKEA created a much larger showroom that was less prone to fire and which allowed customers to walk around and browse furniture in mock up rooms.

When IKEA wasn't able to hire enough people in the showroom, the shortage of labour led to the self-service concept where you pick your own furniture piece in a warehouse and assemble it yourself at home.

Time after time, IKEA was faced with what Robert Thomas calls a reversal or a setback moment in its company's history. Every time they faced these challenges, their resilient team came up with a solution and a different way to frame their business.

Similarly, leaders can take their career experiences and turn setbacks into large strides in leadership. They can extract profound insights from these experiences.

Reframing

Today we recognize Nokia for their cell phones.

Did you know the company started out as a lumber mill on the bank of the Nokia River in the 1800s?

Not quite what you'd expect for a leading technology company.

When their business environment started to deteriorate, the company went through a period of stagnation. This moment of suspension in their history led the organization to re-invent themselves as a technology brand - thus exploring territory they had never experienced before.

Again, organizations, like people, go through moments of stagnation when they have the opportunity to reflect and reframe issues.

Advice for recognizing and taking advantage of teachable moments in your organization

Recognize Fear - Fear is a normal element of a crucible moment. Companies and leaders demonstrate fear, or even a crisis in confidence, when they are thrust into new territory and confront the unusual. An organization must nurture the fear and ensure that leaders deal with it in a positive manner.

Feedback - Feedback is essential after a period of crisis. Even if a leader demonstrated excellent performance, it is always a good idea to provide feedback during such a memorable moment in his or her career. They will remember your words for a long time.

Don't Dismiss Failure - Failure can also be a crucible moment for a leader or an organization. Often, these moments are the most memorable ones that create true change in the way a leader or organization operates.

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