

How Creativity Makes us Competitive

By Dean Newlund

As tragic as they were, what lessons can the space shuttle Challenger and Columbia disasters teach us that we can apply in business?

According to the Columbia Accident Investigation Board, NASA never fixed the underlying institutional problems that led to the 1986 Challenger tragedy. As a result, many of them played a role in Columbia's doomed flight in February 2003. "In both cases," the investigation concluded, "engineers' intuitions, hunches and concerns were disregarded by top management because of the absence of hard data."

To some, this indictment is a call for more measurement tools. Sam Walton's famous quote backs up this plea when he once said, "People behave in the areas in which they are measured."

Yet, does excessive data-measuring play to our lowest assumptions about people? Have we become so focused on measuring data and results that we no longer listen to the voices of our people, effectively squelching great ideas or even warnings of catastrophic importance? Could 9/11 have been prevented if the right people in the federal administration had heeded warnings that Al Qaeda was conducting a dress rehearsal at US airports?

Measuring data—measuring history—is a vital business activity. But it’s hard to imagine a business that doesn’t also need to be able to create new concepts or things. That involves using different thinking skills, valuing different sources of information, and remembering that hunches, intuitions, concerns and creative ideas cannot always be backed up by a spreadsheet. Innovation, healthy cultures, and competitiveness often are the result of people speaking up and saying what is not popular or tested. Kennedy’s “we will go to the moon speech” is a great example of a bold, creative vision for the nation’s future.

Richard Florida, in *The Flight of the Creative Class*, says our over-reliance on data is dampening creativity, and that a nation that is not creative is not competitive.

“Today, the terms of competition revolve around a nation's ability to mobilize, attract, and retain human creative talent,” Florida says. “Every key dimension of international economic leadership, from manufacturing excellence to scientific and technological advancement, will depend on this ability.”

Florida is not alone in his assessment. Daniel Pink, in *A Whole New Mind*, observes a trend toward a more creative mindset. “We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computer-like capabilities of the information age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capability of what’s rising in its place, the Conceptual Age.”

Data is seductive. Data is factual. Having it makes us feel secure. Intuition, hunches, concerns and creativity, because they represent what is unknown, can be scary and unsettling. But a company who embodies creativity and trust, where management and employees are engaged in a compelling purpose, new products are made, new jobs are created and new global markets are born.

We need to support people who speak up. We need to raise trust levels, heed concerns, consider the unproven and even encourage the outrageous. Because to be competitive we need to be creative.

Measuring data tells us where we are and where we've been. Both are important. But, they don't tell us where we can go.

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