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Protect yourself from the dangers of conventional wisdom!

Even the best and the brightest are not immune to the dangers of conventional wisdom. Here's how you can avoid following in the wrong footsteps.

Recently I wrote about the dangers of relying on conventional wisdom to make critical business decisions. I thought it would be fun to look at some actual examples from over the years.

- *This "telephone" has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.*
Western Union Internal Memo, 1876 (after Alex Graham Bell offered to sell them the rights to the telephone)
- *Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible!*
Lord Kelvin, president of the Royal Society, 1895
- *Everything that can be invented has been invented.*
Charles Duell, U.S. Office of Patents Commissioner, 1899
- *Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value.*
Marechal Foch, French military strategist, 1911
- *The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?*
Associates of NBC president David Sarnoff (responding to his recommendation in the 1920's that they invest in radio)
- *Novelty is always welcome, but talking pictures are just a fad.*
Irving Thalberg, MGM movie producer, 1927
- *Anyone who expects a source of power from the transformation of the atom is talking moonshine.*
Lord Rutherford, scientist and Nobel Laureate, 1933
- *I think there might be a world market for maybe five computers.*
Thomas Watson, Chairman of IBM, 1943

- *It will be gone by June.*
Variety magazine, 1955 (referring to rock 'n roll)
- *A cookie store is a bad idea. Besides, the market research reports say America likes crispy cookies, not soft, chewy cookies like you make.*
Banker's comment to Debbi Fields (seeking startup capital in the '80s)

We all make mistakes. And nobody has a perfect crystal ball into the future. But these examples of conventional wisdom gone bad have two things in common.

One, they're all based on deeply held assumptions and beliefs about how the world works. Two, they were all put forth by people or institutions that had achieved high levels of fame, fortune and recognition in their respective fields or industries, "experts."

Business success is one of the biggest contributors to conventional wisdom. Like a superstitious baseball player who wears the same pair of socks on a long hitting streak, we tend to do the same things over and over in our businesses. And the longer our winning streak goes on, the more tightly we hold on to the beliefs and assumptions that originally contributed to our success.

To avoid falling prey to conventional wisdom:

Conduct an assumption inventory.

Gather your management team and ask, "What has changed with our customers, our markets, our industry and the world at large since our last inventory? What assumptions are we continuing to make simply because we "know them to be true"? Of these, which are no longer valid? How do we know that?"

Evaluate all work flows.

Look at all processes, systems and ways of behaving that you continue to hold onto because "we've always done it this way," "that's what the customer wants," or "nobody has come up with a better way to do it." Consider what has changed in the world around you and determine which processes probably need to be updated because of these changes.

Conduct a "premortem" for all projects and major decisions.

Before giving the go-ahead for any major initiative, assess the quality of the information and the decision-making process. Is the data coming from multiple independent sources or one source saying the same thing in different ways? Did the team engage in honest, open debate, or did it engage in "groupthink" in order to speed the decision-making process? Did the leader's opinion unduly influence others in a certain direction? Did the group accept the data without challenging it? The answers to these could be signs of conventional wisdoms that nobody wants to challenge because of the time involved or the need to avoid conflict.

Make your thinking transparent.

Make your thinking visible to others by stating your assumptions and describing the data that led to them. Publicly test your conclusions by encouraging people to give feedback. Identify where you feel your reasoning is the most tentative, and encourage your team to openly explore your data and assumptions. Ask others on your team to make their thinking visible as well. Asking questions like, "What leads you to conclude that?" or "Where did those assumptions come from?" will help to uncover any conventional wisdoms lurking beneath the surface.

It takes courage to challenge the ideas and practices that make us successful. But in a world that moves so fast, holding on to outdated practices is not an option.

On that note, I'll leave you with my two favorite conventional wisdoms:

- *640K ought to be enough for anybody.*
Bill Gates 1981
- *We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.*
Decca Recording Company 1962 (rejecting the Beatles)