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Don't Set the Bar Too Low

We live in a culture that's verging on an obsession with training. It stops us from seeing what we—and those around us—can really do

By Bill Buxton



As an undergraduate, I studied music, majoring in composition and theory. My background in rock and roll differed from the formal training that most of my classmates brought to the table, but that was fine. I wanted to compose and perform avant-garde music, and I worked hard to develop the requisite skills. Like those in pretty much any other faculty, I was preparing myself for my future.

In my third-year history of contemporary music class, something happened that changed my mindset in a way that has positively affected everything I have done since.

The professor, Bill Maust, played a composition, Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question*, that quite simply floored me. Its sparse elegance cut like a knife through all emotional and intellectual defenses while avoiding all of the schmaltz and bombast of romanticism. It was the musical equivalent of Pinter at his best.

After class I headed to the music library, grabbed the score and recording, and dove into the piece—only to come away with an observation that shook me. As far as I could see, even as a third-year student, I already had the technical skills to have written that piece.

A Great Lesson

Of course, I had never come even remotely close. And that is precisely the point. *The Unanswered Question* was an existence proof that has stood as a challenge to me ever since. What it taught me was that there are no excuses. The only thing that lay between me and excellent work was my imagination and willingness to do the necessary work.

Does this mean I suddenly thought I was Charles Ives' peer? Of course not; I wasn't delusional. I knew I had (and still have) a lot to learn. But it was at that point I stopped gauging my progress and creativity based on my past work, or that of my classmates. The goal became to live up to the potential Ives had

laid in front of me. No excuses. If I wanted to be a professional, I had to meet the bar that he had set—a bar that his piece proved was attainable.

There is a general message here. My sense is we live in a culture verging on an obsession with training. Historically speaking, in industries such as music, sports, business, and management, we seem to spend longer and longer preparing ourselves to "do it," whatever "it" might be. Of course, a lifetime of learning is a great thing. But I am not sure that being completely prepared is actually all it's cracked up to be.

Avoidance Technique

Perhaps being fully prepared before you start, while a good sentiment, might actually be an indication of procrastination or avoidance. If the opportunity you are pursuing actually passes you by while you are carefully preparing to be ready to handle it, your "risk avoidance" may turn out to be far riskier than leaping into the fray and trusting your existing (collective) skills.

Am I suggesting that if you have a solid grounding in first aid that you leap in and improvise heart surgery? No. But it seems to me we tend to set the bar too low, to expect too little—of ourselves, our employees, and our organizations. In doing so, we cheat ourselves out of the delight of seeing what we and those around us can really do.

Here is what I like to think: that Charles Ives wrote that piece as a lesson for me and people like me. His ego was such that he showed how good he was not by dazzling us with a complexity that creates distance and separates him from us, but with clarity that says, "You too can do this. It is accessible, within your grasp." He exercised the power of his position through generosity and teaching, not through authoritarian behavior that obfuscated any path that might connect him and those who aspired to be like him.

Four questions that (hopefully) tie this back to a *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* context:

1. How aware do you think most people are of what they are capable of?
2. How aware are you of your own potential? Really?
3. Is there any gift your management or colleagues can give you that is more valuable than what Charles Ives gave me—i.e., help you to realize that your potential is far beyond what you had initially imagined?
4. Consequently, is there any greater responsibility for you as a manager than to make that gift to your colleagues and employees, and make doing so a cornerstone of your organization's culture?

These are questions none of us can leave unanswered

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