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Chance versus Informed Planning

MAKING A LIVING involves taking a chance, but those who conduct their business with the minimum of worry are people who minimize the possibility of adverse chance by planning ahead.

In business, and in living generally, there are some people who stake their capital, their talent and their time on the turn of circumstance; others use their talent to direct their capital and their time in an ordered way so as to gain the greatest chance of success.

The occasions when a man trips over a gold nugget while strolling with his head in a cloud of wishful thinking are few and far between. Indeed, making a living demands more and more that a man watch not only where he is stepping at this moment, but what is coming up a half mile or a mile ahead, next year or ten years hence.

It has been said that history turns on small hinges, and so do people's lives. We are constantly making small decisions, some of them apparently trivial. The total of these decisions finally determines the success or failure of our lives.

That is why it is worth while to look ahead, to set a course, and so to be at least partly ready when the moment of decision comes. By anticipating events we avoid muddle-headedness.

Informed planning is based upon the fact that phenomena do not occur singly. Every one comes preceded by many others, accompanied by many, and followed by many. The cause-and-effect relationship of things is the most important natural law that we have.

When we look behind the happening to find the cause, we lose that absurd air which so many people have of being shocked and pained by the curiousness of life. We see that the events which appear to be freaks of chance are only the latest steps in long lines of causation.

We know very little about real causes, but we do know that under certain conditions certain things have always happened. What we need to do is to judge apparent causes by three questions: (1) Does the causal relationship really exist? (2) Is it the only one that exists; (3) Does it exist with the inevitability we believe?

These tests are necessary because sometimes events

merely follow each other in successive points of time without tending toward an end; sometimes apparently related events may move together because a third influence bears on both; the causes of similar phenomena may not be identical.

Chance in history

John Buchan, later Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor General of Canada, gave an interesting lecture under the title "The Causal and the Casual in History", published by Cambridge University Press in 1929. He provided a number of illustrations of trifling occurrences being followed by great consequences.

It is futile, but nevertheless interesting, to speculate on what might have happened if such and such had been done. For example, the Roman Empire existed by virtue of the grandest application of technology that the world had seen: its roads, bridges, aqueducts, tunnels, sewers, vast buildings, metallurgy and agriculture. Why did not the Roman engineers invent the steam engine? They might have done so at any time. Alfred North Whitehead suggests in *The Aims of Education* (Mentor 1929): "I ascribe it to the fact that they lived in a warm climate and had not introduced tea and coffee. In the eighteenth century, when steam was put to use, thousands of men sat by fires and watched their kettles boil."

Here is another illustration from the story of steam. Napoleon's determination to invade England has been derided, but what if Robert Fulton's offer to outfit a steam-driven fleet had not become buried in committee? Fulton wrote to Napoleon: "I can remove the obstacles — wind and storm — which protect your enemies, and, notwithstanding his fleet, transport your armies to his territory at any time and within a few hours." Napoleon sent the proposal to his Minister of the Interior for instant examination by a special committee, with a covering letter in which he said the project "may change the whole face of the world." Nothing happened.

As an example in another area, consider the delay in opening up Canada to settlement. Thomas B.

Costain wrote in *The White and the Gold* (Doubleday Canada Ltd. 1954): "the grant of ten pounds by a parsimonious king (Henry VII of England) to the man who had found a continent (John Cabot) may have put a damper on individual enterprise in following up his exploit and so resulted in the temporary loss of this great land which later would be called Canada."

There has been an infinity of little things turning the course of history. Menelaus might have taken the sensible view that he was lucky to be deprived of such a flirtatious wife as Helen: then there would have been no launching of a thousand ships, no Trojan war, no *Iliad*, no *Odyssey*. Napoleon might not have had an itchy face on that day in November 1790 when his fate rested in the hands of the French legislators: then he would not have scratched it, drawing blood which led the mob to believe he had been attacked: then the mob would not have invaded the assembly hall and forced the appointment of Napoleon as Consul of France.

Goering confessed during the trial of Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg that a pretty blonde diverted him when he was on his way to join the Freemasons: if he hadn't met that blonde, he said, he would have become a Freemason; it would then have been impossible for him to get into the Nazi party and he could not have become the powerful collaborator in Hitler's evil-doing. Charles Dickens wanted to go on the stage but was turned down because of his husky voice due to a head cold, so he became an author instead of an actor. Citizen Drouet was a modest man who dragged a cart across a gateway near the bridge at Varennes during the French Revolution, frustrating the attempt of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette to flee the guillotine.

In lighter vein, consider the effect of Cleopatra's way with men. Pascal says in his *Pensées*: "Cleopatra's nose; had it been shorter, the whole aspect of the world would have been altered." But perhaps Pompey, Caesar and Anthony would have found her undoubted intelligence, her personality and her appeal irresistible no matter what length her nose. And Egypt, as the granary of the Roman world, was a trump card for ambition to seize; its importance did not depend upon the profile of its queen.

Some of these were chance events, but we must not attribute to chance things which have an explicable cause, nor should we allow confidence in chance to prevent our doing what common sense and logic tell us we can do to bring about the end we desire.

About luck

Belief in magic has played a large part in human history. The essence of all hocus-pocus is the delusion that desired results can be obtained without rational co-operation of human powers and physical conditions. The business man cannot approach his job efficiently if he does so in the mood of primitive men. Yet there are still people who carry good luck pieces, or have them on their desks, and there are still gamblers who

turn their coats for luck as men did in Victor Hugo's *Laughing Man*.

The "lucky" man is usually the man who knows how much to leave to chance, who knows that it is a mathematical certainty that chance is no respecter of persons but is absolutely impartial. The universe is governed by the law of cause and effect; if he ignores this law, a man may make excuse for his failure by blaming chance or luck.

The man who has planned his course, and is going in the right direction, sets up a group of circumstances contributing to his success. Then he is in position to turn every incident into something for his good. As a wise philosopher once said: "The numbers are indifferent, the dice are indifferent. How can I tell what may be thrown? But carefully and skilfully to make use of what is thrown, that is where my proper business begins."

People have various ideas about the source of inventions and discoveries. One is the flash-of-inspiration theory, as when the apple fell on Newton's head and suddenly he knew all about gravitation; a second is that invention comes by putting trained teams of professional people to work along strictly defined lines from nine to five daily. In fact, most great inventions and discoveries have come from a flash of creative genius based on a long period of planned and painstaking research. A man needs originality, knowledge of his subject, freedom from prejudice, discipline to work hard, and a plan to follow.

Unless there is planning based on information and preparation, the chances of success are diminished and you find yourself helpless before the impact of an unexpected problem or twist of events. When you provide for known eventualities you are left free to deal with the unknown.

Well-informed planning enables you to proceed without hesitation. You study data on the needs, you imitate and improve, you make good deficiencies, you evaluate substitutes, and you do all these as you go along, based on the information you have gathered and your increasing experience.

The mere act of recording on paper the why, what, where, when, who and how of any job will, of itself, generate ideas of how the work can be done efficiently. That is constructiveness at its best.

No one can deny these virtues; planning helps to avoid overlooking details which should be considered before action is taken; planning co-ordinates and schedules actions so that efforts are placed where there is most room for improvement and chance for success. A plan should be detailed for the length of time that the future is reasonably predictable. It should contain specific target dates for accomplishment.

There are two sorts of detailed planning: the nervous, fussy and pestering kind, and the planning that, with a definite end in view, takes the necessary pains to attain it. Sinclair Lewis illustrated the first in his book

Babbitt where "Babbitt's preparations for leaving the office to its feeble self during the hour and a half of his lunch period were somewhat less elaborate than the plans for a general European war." The biographer Vasari illustrates the second: the Pope commissioned Leonardo da Vinci to paint a picture. On learning that Leonardo had started by experimenting on the varnish he proposed to use, seeking a product that would be long-lasting, the Pope exclaimed: "Alas, this man will never get anything done, for he is thinking about the end before he begins."

There is a bonus value in planning: it avoids worry. The wise man, though he will not sit down under preventable misfortunes, will not waste time and emotion upon such as he can avoid by careful forethought. To plan is to take positive action against worry. You escape being perpetually irritated by the unexpected and by the demands of things left undone.

It is good planning, in private as in business life, to make a list of things that need to be done. Number them in order of their importance. Then start with number one and work through the list. Making the list will consume five minutes, and it will save hours.

All this having been said, however, there is no shirking the plain truth that chance does play a part in our lives. This was well illustrated by the historical incidents. We are compelled to follow circumstances imposed upon us by our environment. As in a game of chess, we are made to modify our tactics to meet those of our opponent. But there is no excuse for starting off without a plan that looks ahead as far as we can see.

The scientific method

Scientists are the best exponents we have of people who work with system and order. The scientific method does not mean the designing of new devices or techniques, but a way of thinking.

Science means getting at facts and trying to understand them. What the scientific approach does is give one a specific and detailed line of endeavour which has a probability of bringing about the desired result. This is not confined to chemistry or physics or biology, but may be seen in the procedure of a successful business man solving a practical problem, a lawyer sifting evidence, a statesman framing a new piece of legislation, a householder planning renovation of his home.

The rules of the scientific method are: to frame the question in clear terms, to take nothing for granted, to accept facts no matter how unpalatable, to collect evidence or data from experience and observation, and to draw preliminary conclusions called hypotheses. The next step is to test the hypotheses to find out what one best fits the observed facts and the ideas deduced and the purpose to be sought. Then draw conclusions and go to work.

This scientific approach leads not only to better work but to better policy decisions. It uncovers the truth, discovers what things are, and reveals how to manipulate them.

Some people dismiss the scientific method from consideration in business and everyday life by saying that it is intolerably cautious, hedging and stuck in the mud. On the contrary, the method speeds things up by making sure from the beginning that the result will be what we want, that the means we use will be efficient, that cause and effect have been considered, that whatever of chance enters into the picture can be handled because of the environmental preparedness.

A scientist, C. H. Waddington, defines science as "the organized attempt of mankind to discover how things work as causal systems." Could there be any better aim for business executives with regard to economic environment and productive capacity?

Information

The fuel behind all verbal reasoning is information. Having information is the basic reality by which you can predict events and control developments. Everything great is based on knowledge, and nothing original that is worth while can be done by a man who lacks the instinct of the truth-seeker. The man who built the first cave house, and the man who designed Place Ville Marie, won success by piercing the mist and obscurity of the unknown. Information is not wisdom, but knowledge used for thinking. By keeping informed of probable trends, a company's executives are able to direct their sales effort into green pastures before the old pastures begin visibly to shrivel and dry up.

A man needs to resurrect within himself the boy's passion for finding out. Young children are interested in almost everything that they see and hear. They are always engaged with ardour in the pursuit of knowledge. Men who have achieved greatly are of that temperament throughout their lives. They see and observe, they note and analyse, more than others.

It is a big step toward success when a man is able to notice that there are some things he does not know, and takes action to fill the gap. To know, to get into the truth of something, is one of life's mystic delights.

Knowledge makes a difference not only to the judgments we utter but to our integrity in matters of true or false. When we have reliable information relating to some matter in which we are interested we have firm ground to stand on as we make our plans and predictions.

We have to do some research. Newton did not doubt that the heavens "declare the glory of God," but he was concerned to find out, by looking through a telescope and doing a sum in mathematics, precisely how they managed it.

Analyse and test

Analysis is the foe of vagueness and ambiguity, those arch-enemies of sensible problem solving. It sorts out the essential factors in a situation or a plan and perceives how they are related to one another. It takes a large view, using the breadth of mental vision which sees things in their true perspective. It discriminates

with regard to one fact and another in its significance for our purpose.

Facts to be analysed usually fall into four classes: form, material, purpose, duration. The philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius put this into a beautiful paragraph: "Make for thyself a definition or description of the thing which is presented to thee, so as to see distinctly what kind of a thing it is in its substance, in its nudity, in its complete entirety, and tell thyself its proper name, and the names of the things of which it has been compounded, and into which it will be resolved."

Having broken down the problem, situation or plan and examined it in its parts, and pushed aside the inconsequentials, what we have left is the significant fraction that needs attention. We must interpret, as well as chronicle and tabulate.

Executives who are fond of mottoes or slogans might write in their diaries for checking once a month: "WIGO", standing for "What is going on?" It will prompt them to tear their minds away from routine to take a look around and within themselves. Answers to the question "WIGO?" can be fascinating, sometimes exasperating, but nearly always tremendous fun.

There are two simple actions essential before a problem can be considered solved or a plan thought of as being complete: tidy up and check. In no matter what convulsive scene you may be living, you need to assign proportions and priorities as far as possible so that no loose ends are left dangling. An imbalance in one activity may upset a grand plan.

Decisions must be tested. A business man has to cultivate his sense of discrimination. Examine the bases of plans, and test every step of progress in carrying them out. It saves time and money to show up falsehood wherever it exists.

Having alternatives

Decisions should take note of alternatives. A plan need not be absolutely cut and dried, perfect to the last crossed "t" and dotted "i". It must make intelligent provision for the unforeseen.

There is no complete catalogue of the mistakes people make in business and in personal life. An examination might show the most common to be these: failure to see alternatives, the limitation of alternatives to an over-simplified either/or; false estimates of the relative merits of alternatives. When you come to a fork in the road your plan may not fit "as is", but if you have looked ahead discerningly you are in position to choose the better path with advantage.

Whatever happens, it is always profitable to have thought things out. Science has its "back-room boys" who have their eyes glued to microscopes and their minds always a step ahead of what is known. Business men, too, need a place of retreat to which those responsible for policy and planning may retire to scrutinize closely and think broadly. The words "ivory tower" are often used disparagingly. But to withdraw into a place where one can assimilate facts and get ideas

about them, think calmly and plan constructively: that is common sense. It is the glory of the executive type mind that it takes knowledge, experience and wisdom and draws them into focus through planning.

Then follows responsible action. A working balance must be reached between desirable ends and the price to be paid. Lesser men flee from this responsible decision-making, but successful leaders know that a business will starve on a diet of suspended judgment alone.

Planning is barren without organization and action. In an age whose symptomatic drug is the tranquillizer, there is room and need for individuals with the zest to face life boldly. They will get the structure off the drawing-boards on to the foundations. We recall the little Dutch boy who saved his town by plugging a hole in a dyke with his finger. Besides the boy, his finger, and the lucky chance of his passing by, there were needed realization of the situation, initiative and quick action.

This involves courage, too. Having done our planning, we must risk our convictions in an act. We have chosen, and choice involves precarious possibilities. If we have done our homework intelligently we can face this challenge with calmness. In fact, if we have prepared well we may take as our motto that engraved on a famous battle-axe: "I either find a way or make one."

Change is certain

No planning, of whatever skill, can protect us from having to conform to the great changes that are inevitable in our lives, our business, our country and the world. In an older society people moved on rails from birth to death, according to indisputable laws. Now we are aware of many question marks, and other people's answers affect our most intimate lives.

This means that our plans are subject to review and amendment to meet new conditions. We need to move our mental furniture around, to throw out whatever does not belong in the new environment to make room for better pieces.

Look again at science. The discoveries of Aristotle were replaced by the discoveries of Newton, which were replaced by the discoveries of Einstein.

The essence of all this is that planning cannot be put off or ignored without damage and danger, no matter how optimistic of good luck you may be, and that planning must take account of chance. Indeed, to travel without plans imposes this added element of chance: you may unconsciously follow plans made by others for their personal benefit.

A life or a business without planning is like a lump of modelling clay in a kindergarten, which every day assumes a different shape according to the personality of the child who tries to express himself through it.

Vital personalities prepare and plan their future. They take all the measures necessary to influence and insure the fulfilment of their aims. They don't travel bumper to bumper, but keep their eyes on the road far enough ahead to avoid trouble.