

Imagination Rules

by
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The phrase "because that's the way we've always done things" in answering the question "why" is not only a recipe for failure in today's competitive business environment, it is a doomed mindset.

At Apollo Trust Company, we realize that one of the keys to remaining an independent community bank is to stay one step ahead technologically. That means changes in processes but also changes in the way we think.

For example, we used to look at how other banks were doing things. Today we look at how other industries are doing things. Unlimited bandwidth, free operating systems and new electronic interfaces are advances in the not-too-distant future which will blow the lid off many conventional ways of doing business. Thinking upside down and inside out instead of always thinking analytically and logically is beginning to take center stage in the business world.

As I try to plan strategically, I find myself reading business books and journals less and reading books authored by the likes of Virgil, Dante and Chesterton more. While this may seem strange, particularly because I never acquired an appreciation for literature, I have acquired a deep appreciation for the inventiveness of the imagination. With the advent of the Internet, what can be created is only limited by the power of that imagination. We are approaching an age where untapped employee ideas are as important as the products and services provided.

One of the most important things I did a few years ago was listen to a college student tell me all about something called the Internet. Today Tony Hockenberry makes our computer systems run in ways I never imagined possible. It was then that I discovered that young minds were a valuable component to a sound company. Why? First, because no one has yet told them that their ideas are impossible. Second, with computers their ideas are often possible.

Against this backdrop, Apollo Trust Company hires a few college students to fill in for vacations each summer. This year I purposely wanted to find the best computer kid in our local school district and bring him on board for the summer. So the call went out to an Apollo-Ridge High School senior named Rick Shank. Yes, I wanted him to do all the unglamorous jobs associated with being a college student. But I also wanted him around so I could bounce off my upside down ideas.

"Hey Rick, do you think you can find a way for our customers to video conference with us through our chat area on the Internet," I asked one day. "Hmmm.", Rick paused. "Let me look into it." And soon I had an article on my desk of a course we could pursue.

But one day the frivolity of the theoretical became the pressing urgency of the pragmatic. It was one of those days where everything that could possibly go wrong did. We had a computer nightmare. To make matters worse, our computer specialists were off on vacation or at school. I knew none of our conventional methods would fix the problem. I had to think of a different solution. I was on Dante's mountain making my way up through purgatory with hell not far behind. I came up with a plan but it was difficult. It would require Rick to weave through avenues of our computer system that he had never entered before. It would require him to put his UNIX programming skills to the test and failure was not an option. Amazingly, Rick pulled it off. Rick leaves us this week and hopefully he'll return next summer. In the meantime, I found the new computer guru of our high school. We talked to him and his parents and he's hired. Yep, he's going to do all the unglamorous jobs associated with being a working student. But you better believe I am going to take every opportunity to tap that young imagination for new ideas.



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