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Awakening Leadership Within

Avoid or Create: Fostering True Success

We could feel the tension in the air. What had been a thriving company had taken a downturn and no one could definitively explain why. Today's meeting was meant to brainstorm new ideas about turning the company around.

As the President of the company began the meeting we could feel everyone holding their breath. Our group was there to watch and assess the conversation and the process. What we noticed was surprising to the leadership team. Instead of a conversation to move the company forward almost 90% of the comments were about avoidance and the past. Each time a new idea surfaced, someone alluded to a past event where a similar idea had not worked for them or for someone they knew or they quickly explained how this new idea could not work. Most of the conversation oriented around avoiding a loss or avoidance of something – losing clients, losing market share, losing profits, avoiding mistakes, avoiding bankruptcy. Rarely did anyone directly mention ways to grow or innovations that could help the company regain its momentum. Everyone seemed trapped by an inertia based in fear so even when the most daring of the participants alluded to creating a new way of addressing the problem, no one could hear it.

There is a monumental difference in approaching challenges from the process of avoidance versus the process of creation. We are deeply rooted in fear; this is evident everywhere in our society, business, world politics, personal relationships, everywhere. We claim we want to create a positive future but we propose creating a positive future by focusing on what we want to avoid and using this as our starting point.

I find entrepreneurs are more able to see the future and create it because they tend to embrace risk and trust themselves. They breathe the creative process, first visualizing what could be then asking themselves, "How will I get there?" Many entrepreneurs just "know" that it is possible even before they know how. But not knowing the how does not prevent them from creating the future one learning step at a time. I often explain this process as similar to writing. Good writers write first, then edit. The editing does not interfere with the writing. Editing happens later after the juiciness is down on paper and the editing becomes a removal of the non-essential, allowing the creation to emerge.

I believe that you cannot achieve sustainable positive results from a negative motivation. If you are motivated by fear and avoidance, it may work for a while, but it will cost you in terms of your personal or organizational health.

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The energy associated with avoidance is heavy and sources from struggle. It moves us away from something we do not want. We may succeed in avoiding that which we fear but we may never succeed in creating that which brings us a sense of achievement, passion, success and joy. The energy associated with creation is lighter, effortless and exciting as we are drawn by and toward our future. It is compelling and it inspires others to follow, even through challenging times. The process of creation makes room for risk and where there is room for risk, there is room for innovation and there is attention to the essential elements needed for success without the distractions of fear.

I believe that creation happens only in the present moment, not in the past or the future. When we try to base creation on past events we are limited by our past successes, or failures. When we try to jump to a future state, we lose sight of the actions that are relevant now in creating that future. Consistently asking ourselves, "Am I doing right now all the things I know need to be done?" focuses our creative efforts in the present, and if we answer "yes" then the path will inevitably lead to our desired future. This presence allows us to really pay attention, to make adjustments in real-time, to be agile in our thinking and to still maintain a course towards the future while navigating unforeseen circumstances.

The first step in moving from a process of avoidance to a process of creation is having the awareness of which process is dominant in our organizational culture. The key indicators are found in our language. Here are some common indicators:

- Language that is based in the past – "the last time we did that..."
- Language that is based on the loss of something – "we could lose customers if..."
- Language that is based in fear – "what if we have to layoff employees?"
- The words "no" and "but" – "that's one idea, but..."
- First responses to new ideas are negative – "that won't work because..."

The process of creation is not only useful for creating something from nothing but equally important, to be a leader in one's industry. Constantly questioning the status quo by asking "what if?" questions introduces new possibilities that challenge our own complacency in times when we do enjoy success. In Guy Kawasaki's book, "The Art of the Start" he encourages entrepreneurs to "think differently, polarize people and find a few soul mates". He encourages entrepreneurs to "shoot for doing things ten times better than the status quo".¹ The only way to do this is to be in the unlimited process of creation, not avoidance. This may well polarize people –

¹ Guy Kawasaki, The Art of the Start, pgs. 10-11



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either they will love it or hate it (think Honda Element or Toyota Scion). But in a creative process, it doesn't matter that the whole world doesn't love us or agree with us. It only matters that the right people, employees, customers and clients align with our product or service. And there is certainly little better than having a companion on your journey, a soulmate – someone that we team with who shares our philosophy and vision but may balance our qualities and traits with theirs.

Next time you are in a meeting with your team or at your company, listen carefully. You may be surprised to hear the language of avoidance. If you wonder what keeps you or your company from a breakthrough, even if you are currently successful, pay attention to those conversations that have the potential for creating and foster the process of creation. Energy funneled into avoidance will keep you from reaching your true potential.

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