

BECOMING A BROKEN FIELD RUNNER

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One of the great thrills in sports is seeing a well-executed play develop into a scoring situation. There are those rare moments when everything just falls into place. Occasionally, this happens in the business world as well. We create a plan of action and the execution is flawless. Money changes hands and we are in real danger of arm strain from patting ourselves on the back. Did I mention that this was the rare exception? Average players look good when a well thought out plan is successful; but it takes an exceptional performer to look good when the playing field suddenly changes.

Growing up, my father used to say that one of the keys to success was becoming a broken field runner. He used a football analogy to explain the concept. Some of the most dazzling plays from the line of scrimmage were not the ones drawn up by the coaching staff. Sure, there was a play called for particular situation the offence was up against. The perfect play assumes that the defense will continue along the predicted path. Unfortunately, there are many variables that disrupt the perfect play – a slip on the turf, a shift in the defense or even a lapse in assignment. What truly makes the ball carrier, be that running back or quarterback, exceptional is the ability to adapt on the fly and create a gain on a broken play. I loved watching rookie quarterback Colin Kaepernick, of San Francisco, create something out of nothing. The great ones have this ability. As business professionals, this same ability to overcome daily obstacles is what separates the solid practitioner from the exceptional performer.

Lets take a look at the role of the inventory investor, or purchasing agent to those of you who haven't adopted this mentality. Do they have to be adaptable in the face of changing circumstances? Absolutely. A good friend of mine refers to the replenishment of inventory as a thousand little decisions done right every day. A clerical agent runs reports, generates purchases and generally tries to make sure that they don't incur the wrath of the sales team. What happens when we run out of stock and we are still \$800 short of the freight prepaid level? While this situation would cause undue anxiety in some, the professional inventory investor has the ability to source product in order to maintain customer service. They don't panic, they adapt.

When you are in the import business, you know that many things can go wrong in vast blue ocean between you and the supplier. How do we react when a container gets hung up in customs? How do we handle a longshoreman's strike? These are all potential barriers to a successful procurement play. Your best performers find a way to shine in the face of adversity.

I am in the middle of reading a book that repeatedly illustrates this point. The book was written by one of the members of SEAL Team Six. This is the elite team sent in to remove Osama Bin Laden. He talks about the intensive training that he and fellow team members were constantly involved in. Despite the countless hours of training for different situations and contingencies, the original plan almost always went sideways. Whether it was being dropped on the wrong roof

during a mission or bad intelligence, the team constantly had to adapt and modify to complete the goal. Rather than fearing the change, these professionals learn to embrace the change and consider it part of the plan.

The mark of a truly successful salesperson is the ability to change directions in the face of customer conflict. A good friend of mine is a consummate sales professional. He doesn't look the part. He could hardly be considered hip, slick or cool; but man can he sell. Several years ago, were in a nightclub full of attractive young people. My friend was feeling the atmosphere and wanted to dance with some of the other patrons. In spite of being several years older, and considerably less attractive, I watched my friend take rejection after rejection without breaking stride. He just moved on to the next girl. He was never embarrassed or put off, he just kept moving. Persistence must be part of the formula.

How many times have we seen salespeople cave at the mere mention of a price objection? An average performer will accept the new price level in order to keep the sale. The broken field runner will seize the opportunity to discuss the true cost of ownership or look to create a package deal. How many times have we seen sales people run up against a set of plans specifying a competitive product? Does the sales pro turn and tuck their tail between their legs? Of course not, they figure out how to break the spec or submit an equivalent product to the architect or engineer. Barriers become speed bumps to the broken field runner.

Most recently, I have been devoting some attention to the role of business to business credit and the function of accounts receivable management. Is there room for creativity and flexibility in this position? Rigid interpretations lead to missed opportunities and unnecessary conflict with the sales team. What is the goal of A/R management? Many would argue that it is the collection of past due invoices or mitigation of risk. These are the folks trying to run the same play in spite of a shift in the defense. The ultimate goal of the accounts receivable team is to keep customers buying using the tools at their disposal. How do we handle a consistently slow pay customer? Rather than cut their line and put them on hold, the nimble manager will investigate the company and find ways to work with their payment preference. We are still in the sales business, aren't we?

Closed thinking and internal barriers didn't happen overnight. It took many years to get to this point. If you can, remember back to the early days of the business. Were we focused on mitigating risk and adhering to strict policies? I think not. We practiced a little fly by the seat of our pants cowboy-ism. We were nimble and flexible. We found ways to say yes when others would cringe. What happened to us? Success happened and suddenly our priorities began to shift. We became more defensive than offensive.

I am not advocating going back to the days of running around with your hair on fire; but, most companies need to inject more creativity back into the organization. Cultivating a broken field mentality involves coaching your teams rather than managing them. Coaches turn mistakes into learning opportunities. Create small case studies during your team meetings. Ask for opinions on how you would handle

situations that fall outside the normal business practice. You must allow for opinions outside of your own. Remind teams of their goals rather than their procedures.

Given the time and page space, I go on for hours about departments where flexibility has been stifled. Take the time to look around your organization. Are you satisfied with your ability to serve customers? Have you seen signs of complacency or stagnation? Are we saying NO more than we are making the effort to explore YES? As always, I hope that my articles have given you the opportunity to think outside the daily firefight. As entrepreneurs, you once had the ability to cut across the field and make something out of nothing. Remember, anyone can score when the defense stands still. The true test occurs when the play breaks down. Good luck.