

ARE YOU ABLE TO ADAPT?

How to be in touch with your work environment

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Natural organisms have sensors to help them survive in the natural world. Sidney Winter of the University of Pennsylvania points out that some moth species can detect the sonar of bats. To avoid becoming a bat snack, a moth initiates evasive aerial maneuvers to survive yet another day in the competitive animal kingdom. However, in the environment of your family's living room, these same moths can't detect the sound of a rolled up newspaper whizzing toward them.

Just like nature's organisms, manmade organizations may have highly developed sensors that help them survive in a competitive marketplace. The key is to make sure that the sensors you use are appropriate for your marketplace and for gathering useful information. After all, if organizational sensors aren't properly tuned to your environment, your business will take the hit.

Having effective ways to get feedback from customers or clients is critical to the success of any organization that wants to sustain itself for the long term. Your customers or clients are expecting you to help them in some way; you're making a promise of some kind to them. It's critical to know how well you're doing. It's imperative

that you know what your customers perceive that promise to be and that you know how well they believe you're fulfilling that promise.

Some organizations have sophisticated tools that use technology to gather critical data. In his book, "Business @ the Speed of Thought," Bill Gates describes Jiffy Lube's extensive customer database that helps them track customer needs and behavior. Other organizations may decide that a brief survey or phone conversation is sufficient. The key is to know your customers and marketplace. Is your marketplace a cave or a living room?

In considering how to "know thy customer," it may help to ask yourself the following questions:

1. How do I determine from those who matter most (our clients) whether or not we are fulfilling our purpose as an organization?
2. How do I know whether or not our clients believe we are helping them in the way we promise?
3. Should we hire a third-party consultant to provide objective analysis of client input?
4. What will we do with the feedback and input we receive from our clients? Are we committed to act on even the most critical comments?
5. How will we let clients know the action we have taken in response to their input? What action can we take immediately on the

"low-hanging fruit?" How will we analyze suggestions that require a significant change in our business model?

6. How will we use the input we've received from clients to develop ongoing communication with them?
7. How will we identify our most loyal clients, find out why they're loyal and show our appreciation?
8. How do we enable our front-line employees to respond quickly and effectively to client concerns?
9. How will we track the results of any changes we make in response to client input?
10. What are we doing to avoid becoming the moth in the living room?

In answering the last question, it's important to inquire of your clients how their needs are changing, and if your clients/customers are businesses, how their industry is changing. How have their needs changed during the last year? How do they see their needs changing during the next year and beyond? And then ask them how they think you can help them as they adapt. If your clients are businesses, are there ways you can help them avoid becoming the "moth in the living room"?

By answering these questions honestly and implementing effective ways of addressing the answers you receive, you will know your customers better and drive the growth you want and the profit you need. <<

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