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Focus

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Listening Tours -- Why Wait Until You're Fired?

A new CEO took over troubled United Continental airlines in September and began visits with workers to hear firsthand their concerns. Great idea, but a bit late, as United and Continental merged five years ago and have not created the synergies envisioned at the beginning.

Decades ago, Intel co-founders Gordon Moore and Andy Grove faced a tough choice: continuing to produce memory chips, which accounted for most of their revenue but were becoming commodities, or moving full-bore into microprocessors. They asked themselves, "If we were fired, what would our successors do?" "Move into microprocessors, of course," they realized. So they famously fired themselves by walking out of the office and then returning as (mentally) new managers. The result of their decision is well-known.

So, what prevents a leader from setting aside preconceptions and walking out among employees with an open mind, eager to understand what is heard? Inertia, fear, hubris . . . the list is long. Just imagine, however, what you might learn if you listened with a childlike innocence, unencumbered by jaded attitudes and inflexible beliefs. Our frame of reference colors how we interpret things. Expanding our mental landscape to new vistas leads to new insights.

For example, creating a kid-friendly waiting room requires you to look at the world from 30 inches above the floor, not the height of adult eyes. That's a big change of perspective. Here's another real-world example. Pepsi's CEO, a woman, recently noticed during a supermarket visit that Pepsi bottled water was shrink-wrapped in heavy flats, difficult for a woman to handle. And most grocery store shoppers are . . . women! Who knew?

Remember the fable of The Emperor's New Clothes, where the vain emperor was duped by scoundrels into believing in invisible cloth. It was a child who spoke the truth, because "he didn't know any better." So, just as during a great movie, suspend your belief long enough to view your organization with naïve innocence. Chances are, you may find some real magic!

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