

WHAT IS THIS BUSINESS OF “GROWING A BUSINESS”?— By Jeff Hull

Word must be getting around. *CorBusiness* has grown from 2 to 3 in the last few weeks and already we are receiving mail addressed to “Key Executives of Growing Companies”. I guess 33 percent growth is considered good now that the heady days of the internet boom in the 90’s are clearly a thing of the past. In any case, I was pleasantly surprised to find an invitation in the mail to INC. magazine’s 2004 conference on business growth titled: “Achieving Breakthrough Growth – Getting to the Next Level”.

Unfortunately, I was much less excited about the outline of the conference, which struck me as sorely lacking in cutting edge content. Now to be fair, the keynote speakers sound intriguing – turnaround king Gordon Bethune from Continental Airlines for example – but the conference tracks, or themes, seem pretty traditional, even mundane. Tracks covering finance, marketing, operations, strategic planning, and leadership blend together like the first year curriculum in most business schools. In fact, it is almost shocking to find topics such as “*the difference between management and leadership*” or “*putting together a sound strategic plan*” described in terms that haven’t changed, in years.

I remember graduate school research I conducted a few years back that took me deep into the archives of the Harvard Business Review, where I found articles waxing eloquently on these same themes, in 1973. Either what goes around comes around, or there really is nothing new under the sun. In any case, I will still travel to Florida and attend the conference, but not so much to learn how to manage the explosive growth of *CorBusiness*, but rather to check out Disney World with a tax deduction.

But, just for the record...I’d like to share my thoughts on what an inspiring and innovative conference on business growth just might look like as we venture into the new millenium. Interestingly enough, there are hints about **WHAT REALLY MATTERS** all throughout the conference materials. For example: “*Companies are like people...they go through different stages throughout their lives.*” Or “*solving the growth puzzle...spills over into areas of personal values and life missions.*” Yet, all too often these potent phrases get lost in the standard rhetoric of business: risk-proof financing, strategic planning, change management (an oxymoron of the highest order).

Now to be fair, I’m not arguing that these tried and true elements of growing a business are not important to today’s businesses or are any less entertaining than they were 25 years ago. It’s just that they don’t venture very far enough into new territory. The truth is that companies are not just “like” people--they ARE people. And, in fact, to look at any successful company that has withstood the test of time, the reasons behind growth don’t just “spill over” into areas of personal vision: they are based on personal vision. At the end of the day--all vision is personal. Or else it is artificial.

So what if our “growing a business” conference were to approach a company as the artificial construct that it really is, and pay attention to growing the essential components of the business that really make it tick: the people inside.

Now the emphasis upon growing people does not detract from the need to finance, operate, market, and strategize, but it takes us down an additional path, where the true foundations of growth (any kind of growth) can be found. These emerge in the deeper places where we nurture the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of ourselves. Of course, what is not always clear is how these more personal leverage points for growth apply to the “rational”, analysis-filled world of business growth. But what if we could design a conference just for us GENESIS types--people who really do understand the connection between the growth of a business and the growth of the people within it? Well, I suggest that it might look something like this:

INC. Conference for Key Executives of Growing Businesses 2004:

“GROWING A BUSINESS: FROM THE INSIDE OUT”

CONFERENCE TRACK #1--THE PHYSICAL

Session A. Hiring REAL PEOPLE--the only true STRATEGIC ASSET

Like traditional conference materials, this session would focus on the process of identifying, finding, selecting and recruiting the people who will make the business run--without whom, there is no business. However, the focus is not just on techniques for recruiting the “right set of skills” to do a job, but on seeing the acquisition of people as the single most important activity an entrepreneur/leader can engage in. It requires that each potential recruit be viewed as a whole human being. Each individual brings skills to the business, of course, but more importantly, they also bring creativity, energy, drive, relationships, talent, and POTENTIAL. And it is this final gift—potential--often hidden from view during assessments and interviews, that every company needs if it hopes to grow.

Session B. Creating a supportive, nurturing ENVIRONMENT—the only “retention program” you’ll ever need

Our session on recruiting doesn't just focus on finding the right person. Equally important are the mechanisms and processes that a company uses to welcome, assimilate, and support a new person into becoming a fully functioning, top performer. The following elements of the environment, at a minimum, require attention:

- Welcome people with a ritual celebration
- Create spaces that are open, spacious, energizing
- Democratize space--no big corner offices or executive suites
- Allow for a variety of working styles--personal space, personal decoration, quiet, working from home

CONFERENCE TRACK #2--THE INTELLECTUAL

Session A. CREATIVITY --nurturing ideas from everyone

Most traditional business sessions on creativity don't even use the word. Why? For many business people “creativity” connotes chaos, messiness, disorder; things that a “well-managed” business cannot tolerate. The more common term, “innovation”, which is often spoken about in terms of “processes” and “practical applications” and “payback periods” is really a misnomer, especially when it is used to describe the creation of NEW IDEAS. The truth is that NEW IDEAS emerge from people, not processes. Ideas come from individuals having the experience of creativity, which is not a linear “process”. In fact, creative ideas most often resist being generated through a controlled process. They prefer to spring forth at unexpected moments (in the shower!) when our focus is NOT on “being innovative”. Creativity is not just for R & D departments. The following elements can be applied to ALL aspects of a growing concern:

- Build a culture of “no sacred cows”
- Make time for reading, studying, workshops

- Allow space and time for daydreaming, doing “nothing”
- Generate healthy conflict, brainstorming, “open space” meetings, dialogue
- Go on retreat, bring in outsiders—meet often with the 3 C’s of corporate creativity: *competitors, customers, children*

Session B. Intellectual Capital-- the computer that counts: the human brain

It is truly amazing how much energy, time and investment gets put into building the perfect information technology system for most companies. Ostensibly, the payback is higher productivity, but at best this is hard to quantify, and largely elusive. Just think of what might come from equal amounts of energy, time and investment being put into the technology of the human mind. The greatest database--complete with a treasure trove of experience *and* a new idea generator-- is sloshing around in the head of every employee. Yet, precious little attention is paid to the fact that this treasure is free to walk out at the drop of a hat. The key to reaping the potential of this human gold mine—and to retaining it—is to develop leading edge knowledge-based systems, such as:

- Mechanisms for information sharing through networked, non-hierarchical communication
- Retrieval systems--access for everyone to information needed to make decisions
- Knowledge storage and knowledge management tools for continuous learning
- “Playpens” for creativity—interactive, experiential games, toys, etc.

CONFERENCE TRACK #3--THE EMOTIONAL

Session A. Creating a “LEADERFUL” ENVIRONMENT

Workshops on leadership and management usually focus on the skills and attributes required of those rare few who would be leaders. The truth is, however, that this approach resonates with anachronistic assumptions about leadership, such as: 1. only certain people are cut out to be leaders; 2. people NEED leaders to motivate them (ever see a non-motivated 3 year old?); 3. a leader’s focus must be on the behavior of others, not on him/herself. In contrast, our approach emphasizes the truth that ALL people have the potential to lead, first themselves, then others. Leadership is an *act*, not a skill or trait, and like creativity, successful leadership behavior lies potent in all beings, not just a select few. Given this context here are some of the key issues to address:

- All authentic leadership starts with leadership of Self
- There is no “right way” to lead: the key is to experiment and encourage leadership in everyone
- Leader, just like follower, is a temporary “role” to be rotated and changed as needed
- Leadership is not about structure and position--but about character, integrity and self-awareness

Session B. Encouraging the HEART—tapping into the whole person

This session delves into that tried and true subject: corporate culture and values. At the very least, all growing companies today acknowledge a desire to

create a unique “feel” to the organization. Most entrepreneurs want to establish “core values” or some form of corporate “philosophy”. Yet, they all too often make the mistake of believing that these important elements of a business are to be decided by the few at the top, or even alone by the CEO. The truth is that regardless of what the top executives dictate, the rest of the company will develop sub-cultures anyway. People will *behave* according to their own deepest values, even when they espouse the corporate line. This is why there is so much fragmentation and in-fighting in most large companies, which results in a great deal of wasted time and lost productivity. Instead, why not create alignment right from the start? It can be done—but it requires participation across the board and recognition of the importance of the values of every human being involved in the enterprise (even those who may opt out as a result). Here are the things to pay attention to:

- Develop compensation systems that serve individuals not systems
- Build a living consensus of core values and re-visit it often
- Maximize the potential of diversity—embrace cultures, languages, religions; these are sources of creative genius
- Pay attention to symbols, stories, myths, and rituals—every organization has a story to tell: what messages to the heart does yours send?

CONFERENCE TRACK #4-THE SPIRITUAL---Asking the BIG Questions

Session A. Considering the IMPACT of everything

In this era where the economic miracle of capitalism is overtaking the globe, big questions about sustainability and quality of life fall squarely on the shoulders of business leaders. It is shortsighted for entrepreneurs today to think about growing a business without regard for the long-term impact of their activities on the community and the earth. As business has rapidly become the most powerful institution on earth, stewardship of the limited resources we share, becomes a key component of twenty-first century leadership. No business will prosper or grow for a long period of time without addressing some or all of the issues below:

- Remember that everything is SACRED
- Put TIME in perspective
 - “Short-term” and “long-term” are artificial constructs
 - Everything is really long term – it all shows up somewhere
 - There is no such thing as “time management”
- Remember that “non-doing” is equally as important as action-it is the source of creativity
- Recognize that control – of anything – is always an illusion
- Remember that prosperity always results from an attitude of gratitude and abundance, not from beliefs in scarcity

So there you have it. A start. This program could easily be implemented in a one or two day conference. Perhaps evening events could be designed around rituals and dialogue for integration and deeper questioning. The key to the success of this conference--and the success of growing a business, for that matter--is to create a shared awareness that none of these four tracks can operate in isolation. The physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of

ourselves--and our businesses--are inextricably tied together. They nurture, support, and feed each other in a never-ending spiral of personal, and business, growth.

What do you think? What's missing? I'd love to hear from readers with additional ideas for sessions. Clearly there is much more to be said, to be learned, and to be practiced as we grow ourselves and grow our businesses. Let's breathe some life into the staid old business conference format--anyone game?