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# How One Leader Learned That Experience Often Teaches You The Wrong Lessons

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I introduced you to [Bob Geis in an earlier post. He is the guy who has figured out how to run a government office efficiently and entrepreneurially.](#) Before becoming an entrepreneur in a bureaucracy, Geis worked in the private sector –and he did not like much of what he experienced there, either.

“The experience I had in private industry about ways to manage –ways that I was being told by well-meaning leaders to apply to my own Office as the Auditor-Controller, was *exactly* why I left private industry.” Bob Geis recalls.

[“I left private industry because you couldn’t trust anybody, you couldn’t work together to accomplish things. It was dog eat dog –everyone trying to get ahead to everyone else’s detriment. That experience teaches people the wrong lessons about how to get things done. It teaches them to cut corners and to burn other people. Their theory is that it has to be that way. Well, I’m here to tell you, it doesn’t.”](#)

“I’ll be the first to admit that at age 35 I had more energy than sense –but despite that, I was one of the lucky ones: I got the opportunity to learn how and where to get knowledge –real knowledge, deep knowledge. And that is what I needed because [when I took over as the Auditor-Controller](#), there was one other CPA besides me in the entire office,” Geis continues.

“The office was basically a clerking function, not a fiscal reporting and oversight function. I don’t care what your business is; if you don’t have people who are trained to do it properly, and if you don’t have a system to support them, you are either going to get lucky or you are going to fail.”



*The newly elected Auditor-Controller of Santa Barbara County, Bob Geis about age 35 [1991]. "When I went to my very first management seminar, I was filled with stress. But as I listened to Dr. Deming teach, I could feel myself relax. I was learning from him what to do. Not the accepted ways of managing, but effective and humane ways of managing." [Archive photo.]*

In late 1991, Bob Geis, less than one year into his elected term as Auditor-Controller of the County of Santa Barbara, California was under intense pressure to create order in an office that did not follow many Generally Accepted Accounting Principles [GAAP], that was a bastion of departmental silos that didn't communicate with one another, and that had a group of people who resisted change of any kind including using new computer technology "and that was just the tip of the iceberg" Geis says.

[Geis had hired Jim McClure, who had vast knowledge of databases, processes, and systems.](#) "McClure came in and did an assessment, and it was much more than a technical assessment," Geis explains.

"For example, one of the things he told me was that the reason that I thought –and he quoted me 'that everything was going wrong' was *not* because of the people –which is what I had thought– but was the result of the system they had been in for years before I ever became Auditor-Controller. It was the system of how the Auditor-Controller's Office had always done things, the beliefs that previous leaders had about how to manage people, and their lack of a philosophy of management. It blew my mind."

Geis took the suggestion Jim McClure made to "go learn [how to manage in ways that really make sense, not just what people commonly believe makes sense.](#)"

"I had thought the reason I was struggling so hard to turnaround a dysfunctional, unresponsive, and inefficient organization was because I lacked experience and that I had bad people working for me.

"What I actually lacked was good theory of management that leads to deep knowledge, which leads to better decisions and consistent leadership. What I discovered is that it's not the experience, it's knowing the *theory behind it*

that leads you to the right actions. [Deming \[W. Edwards Deming\] used to say that experience without theory teaches nothing.](#) Boy, did he get that right. People claim that experience solves everything. Well, it doesn't, and if you take away the wrong lessons from your experience, you'll just make things worse."

For example, Geis says it is very tempting under stress to let your experience move you towards a command and control leadership approach. "But that was just not me," Geis says. "My parents were educators before the testing craze began. They were mentors, they saw their job as helping people to learn, do better, and succeed. They were not about commanding people to do things."

"That was in me, a part of me. So, I just couldn't get behind the dictator approach of: do this or else. Just do what I say. Set targets. Reward the person who meets targets by creating an employee of the month program. Punish the people who miss the targets with shaming and threats.



*The way to build and sustain success is by having people work on improving the system, together. Rating and ranking people, manipulating them, and making them compete against one another for recognition, may seem like good ideas, but they destroy the system and destroy the people. It's lose-lose. –Bob Geis. [Photo by Lael Wageneck]*

"That may be why I resisted taking McClure's suggestion to 'go learn how to manage.' I didn't want to learn how to do all that stuff –which just felt wrong to me. [I didn't realize that Deming's approach was completely different.](#)"

Geis went to the management seminar with his assistant at the time, John Torell, and with a long "to do" list seared into his brain –a list of items that were causing him stress. The days were slipping by, and he and his staff were mired in the ways of the past.

"As I listened to Dr. Deming talk about a new way of managing I actually could feel myself relax. What he said about the role of the leader as a manager of people, and what he said about the role of the leader as someone who must create the system that supports people in their work really spoke

to me.

“The seminar was everything I’d learned from my parents –and more. And, Deming put it into the context of a humane and effective system of management. Not just the ‘what and the how to’, but also the why. And it all came together for me. I left that seminar with the knowledge that now I knew how to move forward to fix the system in which people worked rather than trying to fix the people.”

Geis had a number of epiphanies during that seminar and one was that he had been trying to bring his experience of private industry to government. “Some of that made sense, such as being prompt in reporting the financial situation of the County, and making sure that the best accepted accounting and auditing principles were being followed. *But the way to achieve that was not by trying to fix the people, or rate and rank people or manipulate people, or to pit them against one another.*”

Stay tuned.

*The author donates the honorarium paid for this blog to The W. Edwards Deming Institute®, a non-profit helping businesses and organizations achieve success through Deming’s philosophies. @KellyAllan6*