

Is doing nothing an option in your business?

by Ed Bernacki

ONE OF THE benefits of working in different countries is that you begin to notice differences in the ways that people in organisations think. I discovered an insight that arose from working on a project that involved government departments in Canada and Singapore. This can offer Kiwi readers a useful barometer for the issue of change.

Singapore has totally reinvented itself over the past 40 years. Although its strength in IT is waning, it is now focusing on biotechnology. The theme that permeates all levels of government policy is that the country must up-skill at all levels to meet future challenges. In other words, doing nothing is not an option. It has created an array of skills training programmes and subsidises the use of these.

To contrast this sense of urgency to change, I reviewed a programme in Canada. Here is the key difference. The Singaporean approach was to start the programme, noting benefits could not be easily measured but they would be obvious in time. The Canadian programme was stuck in a mode of inaction. Why? Because of the need to define “measurable outcomes” which are extremely difficult to forecast. As a result, nothing has happened for several years.

The moral of the story: though prevailing management cliché suggests that, “what gets measured gets done”, the lack of easy measures can kill action and results. The Singaporean programme is running while the other waits for funding. In the Canadian case, doing nothing is an option.

Key questions for business managers making a decision should include:

- every decision in every organisation always includes a “do nothing” option. The difference between those that move forward and those that don’t is that they recognise this option. Doing nothing may be the right decision. It may also be the result of apathy and a lack of conviction. Review key challenges in your organisation. Was the “do nothing” option taken? Why? Was it for the right reasons?
- in a previous column (*Venture*, March 2001) I wrote about the risk of innovative ideas (which many are quick to recognise) and the need to also assess the risk of not taking the innovative idea (that is, the risk of continuing with the status quo). Look at your key decisions in your organisation – which is the greater risk?

New Zealand companies must continue to think globally about the opportunities for sales. Many already do. I personally

experience the results of two highly innovative companies on a regular basis in Canada.

Les Mills World of Fitness successfully markets fitness programmes globally. I take the Les Mills Pump classes in my gym in Ottawa. Most people think anything this good must be North American but I correct their naivety!

Jasons Design, the makers of high quality souvenir coasters and placemats are found in many Canadian tourist venues. How a Kiwi company is able to market its products with souvenir pictures of Banff and Ottawa is beyond me. But it is clear that the risks the company had to take to go overseas have paid off.

Both cases are excellent case studies for the notion that doing nothing is not an option.

Kiwi managers facing tough decisions should carefully assess the impact of their decisions. They should also take another 10 minutes to define the implications of not taking an action, when the tangible benefits are hard to measure.

Sometimes innovative ideas may seem hard and risky but the consequences of doing nothing may be just as hard and risky.



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