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Be Better. Be Different.
July 7, 2016

Imitation is said to be the greatest form of flattery. But more than that imitation is a great way to learn. Want to know how to swing a golf club? Imitate an Ernie Els or Jordan Spieth. Want to be a better cook? Then watch Rachael Ray or Guy Fieri and try to do what they do. Imitation is something I practice all the time. I watch how people care for their yards, and I'll try to do it the same. I see how someone deals with an unruly customer, and I'll try to copy that. I notice how people write, and I'll give it a shot. And to a degree all this mimicking is a good thing; it certainly helps me discover some skills much faster than I would have ever learned on my own.

But as helpful as imitation is, I find that what really makes me or you or company ABC better at what we do is not the things we imitate but the things we do differently. You might even say that to be better at just about anything, at some point we have to do more than imitate; we have to be different. Different in what we do and different in when and how we do it. Always add salt when a dish doesn't taste just right; always push hard on others when they aren't doing what you want; always try the same strategy against your competition, and things just won't fare too well in the long run. If we want to better in just about any arena of life we must avoid the world's ruts as well as our personal ruts.

Be Better: Market Your Differences

To shine a bit more light on this idea, let me explore a few situations in which being different will help you be better. First, let's talk about marketing yourself. Considering the number of people these days in the Energy Corridor that have found themselves on the outside looking in and having to find new employment, this is probably a good place to begin.

My guess is that nearly everyone here has put together a resume at some point in time. In doing so, you probably took a look at some other resumes to know what a good one looked like. The format is pretty similar, isn't it? You list your education. You list your previous jobs. Perhaps you add a section on specific skills you have. In the end, you

have a resume that is reasonably solid, but probably looks like everyone else's.

In an energy market like this, looking like everyone else will probably not get you hired. You need to show yourself to be a different than others. That doesn't mean drawing up a resume in pink font or adding a picture of your hidden tattoo, but it does mean taking a look at what you have to offer that is different than others. When marketing yourself, people should know what your superpower is—what you do particularly well. You might say, "I am not sure what that is?" Then take a look at how people describe you, particularly when they introduce you to others. Or perhaps looks at what your boss, your colleagues, and your friends come to you for. That will give you a clue in what makes you different.¹ And then beyond your superpower, you might find that your unique networks, the languages you speak, the travels you've experienced, the community engagement you've had are what sets you apart. People need to see that. I like what William Arruda, a sort of guru in these kinds of things, suggests. He says grab a piece of paper. On one side list out your skills and experiences and drivers that are the same as everyone else. On the other side, list what is different. Then make sure people see both sides of you in the hiring process.² If you do, you will find that if you are hired, it will likely be for your differences and not your sameness.

Be Better: Use Different Leadership Styles

Now, let's consider leadership. Sometimes we fall into the thinking that says *this* is what a leader looks like. In fact, we might have some favorite leaders, and have gone about imitating them. As I've already said imitation can be a good form of learning, but we must recognize its limitations. The truth is that no leader is thrust into the same circumstances. The project you are leading has different parameters and different personalities and different external factors than other projects faced by other leaders, which means that leading your team requires different kinds of leadership.

A number of years ago, Daniel Goleman completed some groundbreaking leadership research. He looked at different leadership styles and related their success or failure to the circumstances that called for leadership. These are the results of his research. When change requires a new vision or when clear direction is needed, Goleman found

that an authoritative style is most effective. When there has been a rift and people are under stress, an affiliative style (where you come alongside others as a partner) is most often effective. When buy-in is necessary and input from key employees is essential, then a more democratic approach to leadership gets results. Do you have a highly motivated team? Then probably a pacesetting approach to leadership (Where you say, “Come on, follow me, and let’s climb this mountain”) will be most effective. These are not the only leadership styles and situations Goleman looked at, but you get the point. To be a good leader, you can’t be the same leader day in and day out.

And we don’t need to limit relating differently toward others to what we might call leadership contexts. It bodes well for us to do the same in all of life’s relationships. There is a verse in the Bible that reads, “Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.” Doing the opposite would, of course, create a mess. Even being stoic in both situations would leave people feeling very under cared for. We simply need to respond differently to people given the circumstances. A biblical Proverb says, “If anyone loudly blesses their neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.”³ Receiving a blessing from someone isn’t a bad thing. And a little volume in that regard isn’t bad either. But deliver it in the morning and people aren’t apt to receive it well. You see, even the time of day can call us to be different. And if we want to be better in our relationships and in our leadership, we have to recognize that.

Be Better: Differentiate Your Products & Services

The idea of being different to be better certainly applies to products and services. Companies are always trying to differentiate what they do from others. They even try to differentiate their own products from one another, because they know that even a good product won’t fit everyone’s needs or desires.

This last week I read of a man named Howard Moskowitz. I doubt you have heard of him, but he may have done a great deal to bring you the products you know and love. Moskowitz is a Harvard-trained psychophysicist, which is a fancy term to say that he does research to help companies see how people can come to like their products more. Perhaps Moskowitz’s greatest contribution over the last 40 years has been helping companies see that grabbing more customers is rarely the

result of offering the perfect product (because there isn't one), but is more the result of producing products that tap into the differences in customers. That may not seem all that ingenious, but it was in the 70's and 80's when competition often drove companies on a quest for the perfect product that everyone would buy. Take, for example, his work regarding spaghetti sauces in the 1980's. Moskowitz was hired by Campbell who is the maker of Prego. Prego was struggling against its main competitor Ragu, even though it was a better product in many ways. They wanted Moskowitz to figure out the way forward—how to make a perfect Sauce that would beat out Ragu. So he began to tinker. He had the folks at Campbell make up for 45 different sauces. Some more sweet, some with more garlic, some more tart, some with more tomatoes, some with more chunks. You get the picture. Then he tested the sauces all around the country. But rather than look for the perfect sauce, he looked to discover how people's affinities were grouped. In the end, he found that for the most part people's preferences landed in three camps. Some liked spaghetti sauce plain, some liked it spicy, and some liked it chunky. What was fascinating about this is that no one at the time was offering a chunky alternative. So guess what Campbell did? They offered a chunky Prego sauce and in the next 10 years made some \$600 million. In other words, they got better as a competitor in their market not by becoming marginally better at the product they already offered, but by offering something all-together different. And Moskowitz has done this again and again with different companies; he has helped them get out of their rut and offer something that is truly different and captures a whole new market.⁴ Isn't this what we all want in whatever industry we find ourselves? But to do to this we have to be willing to recognize the differences in potential customers and be different in response.

Now, this idea of offering different products and services to capture consumers, or the idea of leading people differently in different leadership contexts, or even the idea of marketing one's self based on one's differences more than one's same-ness, all point to rather simple and obvious fact of life: this world is made up of very different people and very different problems. And when we forget that fact, when we think that everyone should respond like us, or like the same thing, or be impressed by the degrees we hold that everyone else has, we will likely find ourselves treading water at best, unable to get the best out of ourselves or others.

Now, of course, there are boundaries to being different. We can be too far out there. A number of years ago when Pepsi was seeking to introduce their first diet cola, their research showed that putting in less than 8% artificial sweetener just didn't work and putting in more than 12% also didn't work. In between that range, some people liked the cola more or less, but get outside that range and the product just didn't work. The same is true in life as well. There might be times a certain degree of aggressiveness or colorfulness or extravagance or relaxedness or kindness or economy that is outside the norm will do just fine, but carry it too far in one direction for too long and problems are likely to crop up. I have seen men and women say they are Christians and then live any way they want. Believe me, there is a lot of leeway in how a Christian can act. Scripture makes that clear, but there are boundaries. If you can act anyway you want and still be a Christian, then what's the point in being a Christian?

But with that caveat in place, I say, "Be different and be better." Don't treat the ones you love the same way day in and day out. Don't lead your team the same way in every circumstance. Don't offer the same products and services to all of your customers. Don't try to market yourself by looking like everyone else. People are different. You are different. Life situations are different. And they call us to be different too. At least if we want to be better.

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¹ William Arruda, "[7 Questions to Ask When Uncovering Your Personal Brand](#)," *Forbes* (November 12, 2013).

² Ibid.

³ Proverbs 27:14

⁴ Malcom Gladwell, "[Choice, Happiness, and Spaghetti Sauce](#)," *TED* (Live Presentation, Feb 2004).