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Keeping the Rookie Edge
September 3, 2015

How many of you are veterans in your field? When I ask that question you might wonder what my criteria is for being a veteran and how much experience must you have in order to be called veteran?" Some of you might look around the table, see some gray hairs and say, "Well, that fellow, he must be a veteran." In fact, you may have met someone here today who has been in the same field, perhaps even at generally the same task for longer than you have been alive. And perhaps there is a veneration that goes with that. But today, I want to flip the tables. I want not to lift up the veteran, but the rookie. And the fact of the matter is that most of you are probably veterans. That is, you have been in your field long enough to know the ropes so to speak. You don't wake up in the morning saying to yourself, "How am I going to get done what I have been asked to do today?" And while you may not be the venerated old guy in the field, you are no longer a naïve rookie. Now, you might say, what do you mean flip the tables? Are you going to tell us that a rookie is better than a veteran in some regards? And the answer is yes. That's exactly what I am going to say today.

Boris Goldovsky, the late opera commentator and renowned piano instructor, relates a story of a time he taught a student who was technically competent, but was not very experienced in reading music. In one of her sessions with Goldovsky, she played a piece from Brahms. As she neared the end, she played a G natural instead of a G# and Goldovsky told her to stop and correct the mistake. The student was rather confused and told the venerable instructor she had played what was written and showed him the printed notes. To his surprise, she was right; she had played what was written. At first, both student and teacher assumed that the version of notes she had must have been misprinted, but when they looked further into the matter, they found that all other modern editions contained the same mistake. Countless musicians had played the correct note for years, but had never pointed out the error in the printed notes.¹ Now why would this be? Why did they never see the mistake? They did not see the mistake because the

more we experienced we become in a matter, they less we are able to see outside of that experience.

Let me give you another example. I want you to take a moment and read what is on the screen.

It deson't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod aepapr, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer are in the rghit pcale. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit pobelrm.

S1M1L4RLY, YOUR M1ND 15 R34D1NG 7H15 4U70M471C4LLY
W17H0U7 3V3N 7H1NK1NG 4B0U7²

My guess is you did not have much difficulty reading this. You are a veteran at reading, and because you are veteran you look past all the mistakes and find meaning in a pattern you are familiar with. Of course, there is value to this ability, but what if your ability to see English word patterns means you were incapable of seeing a potential code within the letter groupings. This is precisely where the value of a rookie comes to play. Without a history of seeing letters in certain way, new possibilities of deciphering them are able to be seen.

But seeing outside of existing patterns or experience is not the only advantage of a rookie. Rookies know they don't know anything, at least all but the most arrogant of them. And as a result they are desperate to figure out what they don't know. They ask questions. They seek out experts. And they do so fast because they know that their survival might depend on it. Remember back to the time when you were given a new position, what was your eagerness to learn? What was your willingness to seek out the expertise of others? How was your drive to figure out answers? The answers to those questions is that you were probably far more eager and driven than when you became a veteran. And this conclusion is not just anecdotal. The research bares it out:

- Rookies have significantly higher levels of self-awareness than veterans. We might think of them as clue-less, but they are actually more aware of their gaps in knowledge than a veteran is, and as a result are more eager to fill in their gaps.³

- Rookies seek out expertise more than veterans despite. And, when they do reach out for help, they generally reach out to five times more people than do veterans.⁴ In other words, they generally draw from a greater pool of expertise than the veteran often does.
- Rookies tend to deliver more timely solutions. The research says that they are 60% more likely to deliver on time than veterans.⁵ They see their success as dependent on delivering and are less likely to offer excuses for why something can't be done.
- Rookies are better at seeking feedback, because veterans tend to quit seeking feedback once they've been on the job for a while. So much so that Malcolm Gladwell has concluded that planes are safer when the lessor experienced pilot of the crew is flying, because he or she is more likely to ask the more experienced by pilot for input if something goes wrong.⁶

Now, you might say, "Sure that's what the research says, but do rookies really perform better than veterans? That certainly sounds counterintuitive." It is counterintuitive, and most certainly there are circumstances where experience is key, particularly when a distinct technical skill is required, but when it comes to innovation and sometimes even leadership experience can actually be a trap. Take one study of 501 CEO's from industries like agriculture, mining, construction, manufacturing, transportation and utilities, retail and wholesale, and financial services. CEO's with prior experience produced significantly poorer results on average than those without prior experience. This was particularly pronounced when those with prior experience came from the same industry. When the researchers looked at the reasons that could contribute to this counterintuitive result, they concluded that those with previous experience had a hard time unlearning what had worked in a previous context and learning what would learn well in the new context.⁷

In light of what I have shared you might say to yourself, "Am I doomed? If rookies do better and I already have a number of years under my belt, have I lost my edge?" I think that is a very good question to ask. But here is the good news, the research suggests that the advantage of a

rookie need not be limited to those with little to no experience. Rookiedom is a mindset, and the top performers, whether they are new on the job or have been around for decades, are those who maintain a rookie mindset. So let me give you a few tips of how to keep a rookie mindset.

- Ask questions like you don't know everything, or better yet ask them like you don't much of anything all. One way to do this is simply to announce your ignorance. This might seem a bit odd, if you've already got a lot of experience in an area, but you must remember the people rarely offer information to someone who projects an image of knowing everything.
- Bring on new people with every new project. Teams that work together for a while can create quite a synergy, but they are just as likely, if not more so, to get into a rut of solving problems. Liz Wiseman, author of the book *Rookie Smarts*, from which I drew much of today's material, recalls a time when she worked for Oracle. She was over Oracle University and was asked by Larry Ellison to create a new platform for the University such that it could be provided completely online. Wiseman's department had 450 people in it at the time, and to accomplish this task, Ellison asked Wiseman to cut the department to 100.⁸ His recommendation was not based on cost; it was based on his understanding that the present team simply would not be able to think outside of its current box. And such is the case for many of our teams, they will not be able to think outside of their current box.
- Volunteer to take on a task at the fringe of your knowledge or abilities.⁹ There is a strong correlation between job satisfaction and job challenge; yet so often we stay in our comfort zone and don't stretch ourselves. The result is you don't get the best out of yourself. It is said that necessity is the mother of invention. And generally we aren't very inventive unless we put ourselves in situations where we must be inventive in order to survive. This does not mean you must always live on the edge, but if you want to maintain the rookie edge, there must be times when you raise your hand to do something you've never done before.

- Finally, if you want to keep a rookie mindset, become a half-expert and fast.¹⁰ Of course, that does not mean you can go down every rabbit trail and learn everything you can in every direction, but there must be places where you expanding what you know. Sit down and make a list of what you do not know. Don't take long in doing it. Then pick one of those things on the list and become a half-expert in it. You don't have to learn to do the new thing to the nth degree, but learn enough to know the issues involved and the terminology. I like the urgency the biblical proverb places on learning. It says: "Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding (Prov 4:6-7). Do you have that same urgency to learn? Rookies have that urgency, and so must you if you want to keep the rookie edge.

¹ Elizabeth Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts: Why Learning Beats Knowing in the New Game of Work* (HarperBusiness, 2014), 57-58.

² Natalie Wolchover, "Breaking the Code: Why Your Brain Can Read This," [Livescience](#), February 9, 2012.

³ Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts*, 26.

⁴ Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts*, 28.

⁵ Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts*, 110.

⁶ Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts*, 28.

⁷ Monika Hamori and Burak Koynucu, "Experience Matters? The Impact of Prior CEO Experience on Firm Performance," *Human Resource Management* (Jan-Feb 2015), 23-44.

⁸ Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts*, 49.

⁹ Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts*, 137.

¹⁰ Wiseman, *Rookie Smarts*, 136.