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**The Panama Canal, Domino’s Pizza, and Listening to Feedback**

I would guess that many of you have spent times outside of the States. Perhaps you had a short-term assignment overseas or just traveled to see new sights sounds. Maybe you lived outside of the States for several years or even find your home overseas. I too have had a chance to spend time in a number of different countries, and find that there are a number of places I would like to visit. One of those places is the Panama Canal.

I have long been fascinated with the Suez Canal, not just because it represents a great engineering feat, but because of the history behind its construction.

Many folks know that the Canal was completed by the United States, but it was not started by the United States. It was started by a French company led by Ferdinand de Lesseps. De Lesseps appeared to be the perfect person to head up such a venture. For it was he who led the work to the create the Suez Canal just a few years earlier.

De Lesseps was confident he could complete the task. The Suez Canal was 102 miles, and with the Panama Canal only traversing 48 miles the task seemed more than do-able.  There were a few problems, however, Panama was nothing like the Egyptian dessert. Rather than moving sand, de Lesseps would have to remove hard rock, and dirt from the middle of jungle. Whereas the sands of the Suez were at or near sea level, the geography of the Panama was well above sea level, meaning that a similar type canal would call for an enormous movement of earth. Furthermore, the jungle environment of Panama meant there were poisonous plants and snakes and insects. And there was yellow fever and malaria.

Unfortunately, de Lesseps refused to accept these new realities. Although the latest research indicated that malaria came from mosquitos, de Lesseps refused to believe it. Although, a system of locks would require considerably less excavation, de Lesseps refused to consider that as an option.

The result was that after fifteen years of effort, the loss of more than 20,000 lives mostly to preventable diseases and the loss of some $300 million dollars (roughly $50 billion in today’s dollars), the project was bankrupt and de Lesseps returned to France in disgrace. And he would die in disgrace, I would say, because he refused to change his course when the facts were crying out for him to do so.

One of the books in the Bible that I have been particularly drawn to over the years is the book of Proverbs. As the name suggests, it contains a number of short pithy sayings about life largely written by King Solomon some 3,000 years ago. While the Proverbs cover a myriad of topics and themes, there is one theme that seems to be repeated over and over. Some would even say it is overriding theme of Proverbs. And that theme is this:  The wise person is open to learning and correction, and the fool is not. Take a look with me at a couple of the proverbs that speak directly to this point.

Fools are headstrong and do what they like;
                wise people take advice.  12.15

He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame,
                but whoever heeds correction is honored.  13:18

He who listens to a life-giving rebuke
                will be at home among the wise.  12:31

You see, Proverbs seems to tell us that we are a lot better off if we press into feedback and correction and instruction than if we don’t.

I would guess that if I asked you to make a list of pizza providers in the United States, it would not take you very long to add Domino’s to the list. It may not be your favorite pizza, but considering that they have more than 10,000 stores worldwide, they are certainly a recognizable name.

Domino’s, however, was not doing so well about five years ago. Customer taste surveys placed Domino’s pizza at the bottom of the pile. They had built a company largely on fast delivery, but that was no longer enough. And their stock price indicate such. Five years ago, Domino’s was selling for about $8 per share.

Domino’s had a choice, either to keep resting on their laurels and doing things as they always had or face head on that their pizza was not good enough. They choose the latter. You’ve probably seen their ads, facing up to the fact that their pizza wasn’t very good and they’ve worked hard to make it better. Perhaps you have even tried some. If you have, there is a good chance you’ve found it to be a better pizza, because as a result of their willingness to make corrections to their product, sales of Domino’s have risen significantly and in just five years, their stock has risen to about $75 per share. Now, that’s a pretty nice turnaround, wouldn’t you say? A nice turnaround that I would say came about because of Domino’s willingness to press into feedback and correction.

Now, I don’t think it is hard to see the value of what I have to say in the working world. There are ways in which it is incumbent upon us in both the for-profit and non-profit world that we have to listen to those we serve if we are going to thrive and perhaps even survive.

But I think there is some more personal ways that this idea of heeding correction comes into play as well. I think, for example, of times when I have coached kids in some sport or another, and I gather them to tell them a thing or two and they don’t seem very interested. And I have to ask myself do I keep my approach the same, or do I take their response (or lack thereof) to heart and change things up? Or how about on the homefront? I’ve been married for some 26 years. And my wife is kind enough to point out some of my weakness along the way.  Sure, I can shrug those all off and not make any adjustments, but something tells me I would not be doing myself well or my marriage well by doing so.

So whatever the case, it seems to me that as individuals we can’t afford not to heed the voices of correction in our worlds if we’d like to build something of real value and worth.

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