

HEADING INTO THE WIND

How to course adjust when things don't go as planned

How vividly I remember learning to sail. It was at summer camp during junior high. The instructor explained the relationship of sail and wind, the rudder, and leaning with my body. He emphasized how the sailor must monitor and quickly adjust the variables, while navigating toward a specific destination.

It all seemed logical until I got into the boat and

actually tried it. I remember how counterintuitive it was to tack left in order to go right. I felt overwhelmed at the need to adjust so many things simultaneously while also focusing on my destination. And the wind was so unpredictable. (I drank a lot of lake water that summer.)

As my sailing prowess improved,

one thing quickly became apparent: success depended heavily upon my response to the wind — the unpredictable wind. Etched into my head was the learning: Sometimes, you need to tack left in order to head right.

I have seen this at play as I have coached executives to develop and progress in their careers. Sometimes, they need to tack left in order to head right. If you wait

for the wind to pick up and fill your sails, you may find yourself sitting idle for a long time: waiting, wondering and missing the chance to advance by heading in a direction slightly different from the one they were expecting.

Many executives are finding that to move ahead they need to “tack left” and develop capabilities and career paths that differ from their expected course.

Here's the proof: In a recent study, a colleague and I interviewed sitting CEOs of 27 *Fortune* 100 companies asking them, “What best prepared you for the CEO job you now hold?” The No. 1 response was not “running a bigger business unit.”

Instead, No. 1 was “running a standalone business unit outside of the United States, with full P&L responsibility.”

For many, this job meant leaving a bigger business unit they were running in the U.S. — or a bigger function they were currently leading. This is not the usual sequence of career development. But the experiences gained in this slight detour taught these CEOs how to work in multiple currencies and in emerging markets, where English was not the first language. They had to know how to set up, implement and nurture business partnerships

and collaborations. They developed new sensitivities by living in another culture. Upon reflection, most of the CEOs saw this as their most valuable preparation for becoming CEO of a global company, and yet, most of them did not predict it would be part of their development.

When you face a wind that stops your sails or starts to take you in an unexpected direction, pause and ask yourself, “What do you really need to learn or demonstrate in order to be successful? And does this rerouting actually help you get there?” Remember that sometimes a lateral move or a half-step change can allow you to acquire skills and experiences you will need later on.

Whether sailing or running a business, we all know that the wind is neither predictable nor steady. It can rise and force you to act quickly, and it can die even faster, leaving you idle. The key is for executives, like sailors, to seize the wind and sometimes be prepared to tack left when you expect you will be heading right. Truly examining the equation for your success may convince you that tacking left to head right will not only enhance your capabilities toward your planned goal, but it just may unlock new opportunities you've never even thought about. <<



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