

## 9 IDEAS TO VITALISE BUSINESS AND LIFE!

**IDEA NO 1:** Keep probing to understand the real issues in any exchange or undertaking. Try to link what you say to the larger objectives of the organisation, your business unit, function or team. That way everyone understands what's "behind" the stances you take. Talk purposes, not tactics. The first needs alignment, the second can and should be co-created and recalibrated. And when anyone says, "Well why don't we do 'x'?", don't react, ask "tell me why you think we should"? And keep asking until you hit an aim that you share with this person and then evaluate the recommendation on that basis. Never debate the suggestion until you've unearthed the best motive for it. We can all assume the worst motive, but find the positive intent. That's the lever you can use to move people, their world, or your own.

**IDEA NO 2:** Be direct. Be respectful. But be clear. Use questions in a Socratic rather than prosecutorial mode. Too many corporate leaders dance around what they wish to say. Or else they say little, except via ironic emails, or to cronies or cohorts, thereby undermining the culture of the organisation. Make it clear what you are seeking to convey. But as the transactional analysis experts tell us, make it an adult to adult exchange. Don't whine (child to parent), or chide (parent to child), or accuse (child to child), or project (parent to parent)... follow with emotion as appropriate and if necessary, but only after you've made the point, as a point, to a peer. "I believe we have to get the service delivery improved here. Do you agree? Help me understand what the issues are so we can support you here." Said in the spirit of genuine exploration, without other insinuation, with an implication that we may have to help, or operate differently as well, and a dialogue ensues, rather than friction-filled invective and finger pointing.

**IDEA NO 3:** As you engage clients and the market, remember resources can be created for an idea that's valuable enough, and money will flow when the impact is distinctive enough and palpable enough. You have to create enough priority and urgency in the mind of the market and the mind of your customers for them to enthusiastically want you and your vision to succeed -- because it improves their lives and outcomes. Become a niche. As Dan Sullivan of The Strategic Coach puts it: "The smaller the niche, the larger the market." Yes, as long as you define it in value terms and engage with it accordingly.



**IDEA NO 4:** In every interaction, get clarity of next steps. Never accept fuzzy static like, "Let's think about it" or "We'll get back to you." Instead ask, "What precisely will we be thinking about? Therefore when shall we next connect to explore this thinking or build on this idea?" Or, "Glad you'll be getting back to us. Given the need to move this along that we've both affirmed, when's a good date to be in touch to hear how you want to take this forward?" If people then balk, you know you don't have agreement, or rapport, or trust, or buy-in. Use specificity and "measured urgency" to elicit real motives, current comfort and to shape perceptions as to what's being agreed and what next needs to be done.

**IDEA NO 5:** Improving performance, as Timothy Gallwey taught us through his "inner game" approach, is not a "knowledge challenge". Rather it is the creating and focusing attention on key things that drive performance and remove interference!

You identify learnable skills that you work on with deliberate practice (practice that isolates and focuses on a key component of performance, like the right amount of 'edge' needed when downhill skiing, the ability to bridge from exploratory questions in sales, or for singers to use breath rather than pushing out through the vocal chords). And you set to improve iteratively through deliberate practice, removing three types of interference whenever possible.

The first, our own self-destructive internal commentary. The best technique is not to debate it, but just shift attention back to the performance. The second, other people's well intentioned coaching, which is often a commentary on what works for them, not necessarily you. Request they focus on the outcome in broad terms, not minute details as to how to produce it. For example, ski coaches do much better when they say, "Focus on and practice standing up at the end of a turn," rather than, "Look up, straighten your legs, shift weight between skis, face downward..." Who can possibly keep that straight and NOT look like a marionette? Third, the "interference" of dysfunctional processes, equipment, infrastructure, or lack of relevant insight. So if you don't understand the sales cycle, have poor material, and haven't seen your product or service in action, all the "questioning" and "bridging" will seem artificial.

Locate the source of the "interference" that prevents great performance, identify the improvable most relevant skills, and put awareness into deliberate practice. Breakthroughs will occur!

**IDEA NO 6:** Whatever you are currently working on is both today's challenge and tomorrow's recommendation. We have to manage the both/and duality of improving performance, while also creating the future. If we take our eye off either, we sacrifice what we can deliver. Imagine a project where we sweat the details of execution to the nth degree, lose sight of the market insight that launched the project at the beginning and fail to "stress test" our tactics against the original consumer "wow-say" the project was initiated to deliver. We can all too easily get lost in the fog of activity and forget to focus on what really matters. Show me the leader who knows the few vital things in a project to never forget and to always further, and I'll show you someone who will drive success. Never major in minors, and always sift the essential from the incidental.

**IDEA NO 7:** Careers and key business relationships both work by dint of natural progression. They advance via milestones and by goal posts that are continually moving. Instead of seeing how much competence you can radiate (if you have it, the radiating will be natural), look instead to the following and your career will flourish and your relationships will blossom:

- ✓ In what ways can I make other people more confident in what we are progressing?
- ✓ How can I make my boss and team-mates smarter because I'm on their team?
- ✓ How can I help my team and its members to succeed?
- ✓ How can I create excitement about the things I'm working on?
- ✓ How can I become impeccable in commitments and follow-through?
- ✓ How can I improve the art of speaking with passion (as if I were right) and listening with humility (as if I could be wrong)?



**IDEA NO 8:** Never be cowed by position. Insist on having value-for-value exchanges. When clients don't return calls, I'll check back, but will release dates they refused to confirm

(much to their chagrin when they wake up one day and decide they MUST have that date!). I have no diffidence in asking people to honor their commitments. Not to do so, respectfully but firmly, relegates you to stooge-status. We all know things can intrude, and should be reasonably forbearing. But we also have to remind people that partnership (which is all professionals offer, in companies or between businesses) is a two-way street paved with mutual accountability and trust.

Don't train people to treat you as an accessory, an afterthought or a replaceable piston rod. Equally don't preen, don't strut and don't perpetually blow your own horn. Let your actions speak and be proud to showcase those, but as Mark Twain observed, "Noise proves nothing; often a hen that has merely laid an egg cackles as if she had discovered an asteroid." Be gracious, be flexible and pick your battles and be magnanimous with the rest. You'll create a justifiable well of good will you can draw on when you need to.

**IDEA NO 9:** Imagine if our operating paradigm was to try to make situations and opportunities better. The field is wide open if that's your operating framework, template and orientation. Last night we were to fly to Singapore. The latest East Coast snowstorm was to hit from 7 pm to midnight, and then taper off. So Singapore Airlines moved their flight time to 1 am from 11 pm. However, the storm was less than fastidious with timing. It flared up at 9 and intensified at 1. At 2 o'clock the airport was closed and that meant we weren't making it out. Now, a number of things happened.

We discovered that the business class lounge in which 35 people were huddled was about to be shut, there weren't enough hotel rooms in the immediate vicinity and roads were impassable and no one could get to New York.

After being challenged, the staff rallied, persuaded SAS (whose lounge Singapore Airlines uses at Newark) to keep the lounge open, volunteered as servers (the actual servers clocked out at 2 pm), got pillows and

blankets from the plane, got as many people off to hotel rooms as they could, and even rescued our bags from the plane.

Not a great situation, but they did what they could to step out of script and step forward.

Opting to head home, I called a gentleman who often drives us. While no car services were running, he graciously spent 45 minutes digging himself out, got in his SUV, drove to the airport and took us back home. It was 5 am when we arrived. I'm in his debt and will remember the smiling, gracious way he came to help us while larger transportation services were closed.

Not every moment requires such dramatic action. And in those that may, many do acquit themselves well --- we almost sense the occasion demands it, and so we rise to meet it. But if we could remember that, every day, there are so many such moments, when we can choose to step up and make things better, there may be no greater act of sustained heroism than to come through in this way for all those who count on us, or wish they could.

#### WRAPPING UP

So take these ideas forward. Make them vivid in your life, business and otherwise. And remember the most challenging thing of all, and the most rewarding, is to realise that if our organisation matters, we who animate it matter, others who are served by it or who participate in it matter. And we have to make that matter how we act and interact, communicate and connect, deliver and execute, for our businesses to meaningfully succeed. When we genuinely treat others as if they matter, we ensure we do too!

*Omar Khan, March 2011*



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