

Boston Business Journal

As We Live and Work

Finding our way in uncertain times

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To meet the multiple needs and interests of our readers, the Boston Business Journal will be publishing a monthly column titled As We Live and Work, written by consultants and authors Barrie Sanford Greiff and Richard J. Levin.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. was one of the most incisive thinkers ever to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. Like many brilliant people, Holmes had a number of quirks and flaws -- chief among them a tendency to be absent-minded.

One day, Justice Holmes boarded a train. When the conductor arrived at Holmes' seat and asked for his ticket, the judge searched furiously about his effects, but couldn't find the ticket. The conductor recognized Holmes and said to him: "Don't worry, sir. Given who you are, I trust you. Why don't you just send it to us when you arrive home." Holmes looked the conductor straight in the eye: "Young man, that's not the issue. The question I'm concerned about is not 'Where is my ticket?' but 'Where am I going?' "

That pivotal question -- Where am I going? -- is one of many we have been asking ourselves during the past several months. Not surprising, given the convergence of disruptive events that have forced us to reflect on and take stock of our lives:

- The uncertain war in Iraq
- The potential virulence of terrorist attacks
- The painful realization that part of our economic optimism in the late-1990s was based on a mirage that bypassed sound fundamentals
- The devastating impact of the September 2001 attacks, which exploded our sense of invincibility
- The unraveling of companies decimated by corporate chutzpa
- The severe economic downturn leading to a significant meltdown of our net worth

No wonder we feel as if the wind has been taken out of our sails.

The way we work and the way we feel about ourselves and our families leave us with a sense of fragility and uncertainty. But down as we may be, we are far from being counted out. We

have traveled tough roads before and we will traverse them again. Our resilience is born out of experience, rich in ways that have taught us to overcome ambiguity, fear and adversity.

During shaky times, there's a natural tendency to feel emotionally flooded. We may temporarily lose perspective and quickly grab onto how-to's that promise to free us from our dilemmas. Although short-term fixes have a certain appeal, they generally miss the mark, because most of our problems are more challenging than they initially appear.

Twelve guidelines can be helpful in finding our way during difficult times:

1. What lies in front of us and what lies in back of us are not as important as what lies within us. Fill your mind with productive thoughts. And play with alternative scenarios.
2. Never assume anyone has it made. Jealousy and envy misshape our sense of reality and constrict our actions.
3. Acknowledge your feelings. Chronic anger is a boomerang with a long memory. When you harbor bitterness, happiness will dock elsewhere.
4. To thine own self be true. We grow up when we own up.
5. Risk and uncertainty are not synonymous. Risk is the ability to understand the laws of probability. Understanding risk makes the opaque transparent and reduces uncertainty.
6. Keep your perspective. Wealth lost -- something lost. Honor lost -- much lost. Courage lost -- all lost.
7. Be tolerant of the mistakes of others. We are all beneficiaries of second and third chances. Learn from each blunder and be forgiving to others.
8. Do not mortgage the present for the promises of the future. No man or woman is rich enough to buy back their past.
9. A well thought-out question may be an answer in disguise. It can turn a series of rigid "can'ts" into fluid "can dos."
10. To rest on the road does not mean the end of a journey. Take the time to reflect. In a race, the shell moves fastest when the oars are out of the water .
11. Cover all your bases. We are not two-dimensional beings. We are a complex assortment of mind, body, spirit and more. Attend to each component.
12. Actively appreciate the "normal" miracles you encounter every day. Otherwise you run the risk of converting your nest egg into a goose egg.

No matter how elegant our theories, some quirk or fork in the road may dramatically alter the anticipated outcome.

We need to factor in, based on our subjective experiences and judgment, a number of options before we make a decision.

There isn't a neat formula to deal with uncertainty. The process requires continual sculpting. We must use our unique skills, idiosyncrasies and talents to adapt to the ever-present world of uncertainty. Adapting to the context of a situation, maintaining perspective, exercising flexibility and building resilience are the essential bedrock of being a good manager, a good parent and a successful individual.

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