

Which *direction* are you looking?

by Robert M. Gignac

I was sitting at a red light in Vevey, Switzerland last week when suddenly a horn blasted from behind me. I didn't figure out why until the second blast. My light was green and I was supposed to go. Sounds simple enough, until I tell you that the light that I was looking at was red.

A key learning for Swiss driving is that each lane has its own traffic light at many intersections, and they don't necessarily work in unison. Once I got over the shock of the second horn blast, I realized that and moved on. I certainly did not want to hear it a third time.

As I often do when presented with a situation like that, I tried to figure out what that incident was supposed to teach me (and trust me, I have had many of these after only three months in Switzerland). My first thought was about "focus". Sitting at the stoplight, I was faced with four sets of lights, two across the intersection, and two on my own side. Due to the angles of the streets (very few intersections in Vevey met at 90°), I could actually see another two sets of lights (6 sets in total).

In short, I was presented with too much data to process effectively. It's a situation that we are all faced with every day. Streams of data come at us at a relentless pace, from every imaginable direction. Radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet bombard with seemingly "important" facts and figures 24/7. As we dig our way out from under it all, we're

left trying to process all of the data, sort out the useful from the useless, and make some sense of it.

However, a critical piece that is overlooked in the process is the question "Where does all this data come from—a timing perspective?" Knowing the source is only half the battle. But when it comes to timing, all the "data" that we deal with comes from the past—the past hour, past day, past week, past month, or even past years.

Is that a problem? I think to some degree that it is. It means we spend a lot of time looking at things that happened yesterday instead of looking at what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, and next month. Unfortunately, we have no data about tomorrow. We have projections, forecasts, and the occasional "swag" (systematic wild-ass guess), but we have no "data" about tomorrow. It only becomes data once it has actually happened. Think of your mutual fund investments. The mutual fund company can tell you what the fund did last week, last month, last quarter, last year, since inception of the fund—but there isn't one of them which will tell you what the fund will do next year. Not because they don't want to, but because they can't.

Again, you ask if this is a problem. Those of you who are parents will understand this; you are driving down the highway and a fight breaks out in the back

seat of the car between your two favourite children. You decide to play referee by turning and looking at them to end the dispute. Your car continues to move in a forward direction while you are looking backward. There is a fair degree of predictability about what will happen next. I hope that it is just a car horn and a raised middle finger.

We cannot move forward with any degree of confidence unless we are looking at the direction we are going. It's a little like riding backwards on the train, you see every place you have been, but too late to realize you were going the wrong direction. Unfortunately too many of us are so consumed with the data from the past, that we do not see that we are going in the wrong direction. I am not saying that we should ignore the data and its important. We need to process and analyze it, but once we have done that, and learned what we need to from it, let it go. All that data was from yesterday and the most important things are still in front of us.

It reminds me a little of the story that there are two kinds of people, the first group, people who look at the past and wonder what has happened and why. The second group looks forward at the future, and wonders how to make things happen. It all depends on which direction you are looking. The next time you are at a traffic light and a car horn blast comes from behind you, make sure you are looking in the right direction. It makes driving your car a lot easier; it will make running your business much easier as well. SBCM

continued from previous page

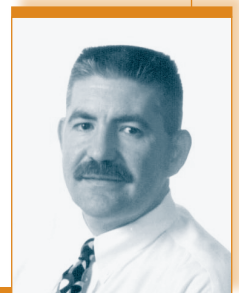
your pants off? If you can't remember when, think about doing it soon. To make changes in one's life, department, company, one has to take risks. Risks don't guarantee success, but if we do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always gotten. The ability to take risks comes from within. It's easy to tell others to take risks while sitting in a comfortable corner office overlooking the battlefield. But the truly effective modern leader takes the risk of stepping into his workers' shoes at least once a year.

Shrek is a risk-taker. He has the mentality of a daredevil. He scares himself regularly, and doesn't mind admitting it.

But he ploughs ahead regardless. He took the risk of going on an impossible journey to find and rescue a sleeping princess he didn't even know. He did it not for himself. He did it for his boss. The King. He encountered dozens of obstacles, some in which he risked his own life. But he came up smelling like a rose.

Take a risk yourself. Don't be scared. After reading this, rent a kid and watch the video. If you saw Shrek when it came out in 2001, it is worth seeing it again. This time, have a look at how well Shrek's philosophy fits into aspects of modern leadership. The world is changing—but the big question is, are we changing with it? SBCM

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