

The Wright brothers on business (05/20/09)

Success assured! That's what the Wright brothers telegraphed home two days prior to their epic flight of December 17th of 1903. Their mission was to prove that "*flight is possible to man*". They succeeded where others failed because they realized that developing a control mechanism was more important than building a stable machine. They instinctively knew that controlling their flying machine would depend on the human ability for balancing inherently unstable machines; just like riding a bicycle.

In business, the pursuit of your mission statement requires a vehicle or organization that is also inherently unstable. This quality makes it nimble and quick to respond to control inputs, when warranted by market conditions. Consequently, without a proper control mechanism you are more like Otto Lilienthal's glider; flying short hops in a straight line, with little hope of recovering from whims in the weather pattern.

Our lesson from the Wright brothers is that people are the solution to stabilizing your organization. Unfortunately, many leaders reject this critical element of a control mechanism because they believe that people are fickle, unreliable and above all too expensive. They prefer relying on expensive advanced technology and tools instead, favoring standardized operations with less need for human intellect. As a result, previously simple processes have become complexly interdependent and the high cost of automation demands tight coupling of resources to make it affordable.

This preference for operational efficiency as dominant approach to guiding and directing organizations to success, sacrifices a previously distinctive and characteristic brand experience. The only remaining differentiating quality is price. The now inevitable price-war of attrition will end up in a merger or acquisition transaction; a further loss of identity. This dead-end race creates only gigantic Otto Lilienthal gliders that often wipe out large sections of the economy when they break-up in mid-air.

However, if you believe that your business success depends on agility, the speed and flexibility with which you innovate the value-proposition you offer to clients, you'd better start "Bet on People". We need more forward-thinking leaders who are willing and capable of removing friction and conflict from the organization, such as the fear of losing one's job. After all, employees are more likely to give you the benefit of their human intellect when they feel secure in their jobs and valued for their contribution; when they feel engaged in the success of the organization.

We learned that the success of manifesting your mission statement lies in coupling human intelligence with a low-friction mechanism for guiding and directing your organization. Just follow the Wright brothers' example; success assured!