



LET'S FACE IT: HINDSIGHT IS OFTEN OVERRATED

BY ELEANOR BLOXHAM

Hindsight is overrated. But many organizations expend great energy engaging in it.

Sure, if we knew then what we know now, we would have done things differently. But we didn't — and I know of nothing that will get us back to that moment in time. We don't have a time travel option just yet.

One organization I worked with had an interesting approach to hindsight. Any time a crisis flared, the top manager would engage in a walking tour to find out what went wrong and whose fault it was. You always knew when it was happening because as she walked through the office, she'd gather more and more people in an entourage traveling from desk to desk, gathering information on what went sideways and who was to blame. I was never a fan. It just seemed wasteful — and the wrong way round.

When I moved up the ladder, I encouraged people to ask a different question: What is our best option in this moment, with all we know (and can learn about) now?

Learning is important.

When I managed large staffs and someone was out of the office, I'd make a regular practice of sitting like a temporary hire at the vacationer's desk for a day, or part of one — and do their work. I learned so much doing that. I could better see how the staff saw life, the often-boring work they had to do — much of it, it turned out, unnecessary. That gave me information to recraft jobs and take advantage of new opportunities — and it was fun for me and better altogether.

But it's hard to escape the grip of hindsight at work. It's not just baked into the way some individuals handle their jobs and treat their staffs. It's built into most organizations' very DNA — and here I'm referring to the dreaded B word: budgets.

Budgets are a very curious creature. They presuppose that you know now what will happen to you then. Sometimes they are applied with rigid force, making it impossible for organizations to ask a better question in the moment, like what

is our best option now? In one of my books, I take on budgets (as one who has overseen their very implementation). For the most part in organizations that take them too seriously, they become a kind of annual rite to negotiate for resources, reminiscent of the behavior of animals. As practiced in many organizations, the exercise reverts to a lower part of the brain rather than an engaged, open curiosity about the future.

I used to indulge hindsight more when I was young. But life is short. True, perhaps I just don't like the discomfort of hindsight. And if there's something to be learned in hindsight — a new, better question to ask — so be it, and I'll look for it. Otherwise, in hindsight, in my career and my life, I've found I'm better off pointing my focus in other directions.



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