

When Sound Advice is 99% Sound and 1% Advice

As I get older, I better understand what Mark Twain meant when he said, *“I am an old man and I have known many troubles, but most of them never happened.”* Today we are getting hit from all sides about the troubles that we will be facing in 2009. Should we be worried? Some of that doom really will happen. We can't just put our head in the sand. However, much of it will surely not happen. The big question is how you will respond to all this input. Will you freeze in your tracks or will you be proactive. Following are a few of my favorite examples of people who had to decide on how to respond to unpleasant input from others.

- *“Liquidate the business right now and recoup whatever cash you can. If you don't, you'll end up penniless.”*
-The attorney of cosmetic tycoon Mary Kay Ash, weeks before she opened her first store.
- *“You're foolish to try to sell sparkling water in the land of Coca-Cola drinkers.”*
-Advice given to Gustave Leven by several consulting firms' when hearing about his plans to launch Perrier in the United States.
- *“It's a cutthroat business and you've got no chance of success.”*
-Accountant for Estee Lauder, founder of a multibillion dollar cosmetics empire.
- *“How long will you go on training all day in a gymnasium and living in a dream world?”*
-Arnold Schwarzenegger's family's pleas for him to get a “respectable” job, not understanding his desire to become Mr. Universe. Arnie continued to respond the same way when he ran into naysayers about his acting and political aspirations.
- *“You're a good editor with a promising future in the business. Why would you want to throw it all away to try to be a writer? I read your book. Frankly it's not really that good.”*
-A New York publisher's comments to James Michener about his first book, *Tales of the South Pacific*, for which Michener won a Pulitzer Prize.
- *“The language on the floor is too rough and there's no ladies' room.”*
-The response of officials of the New York Stock Exchange when Muriel Siebert wanted to buy a seat in 1967. She bought a seat on the exchange anyway and remained the only woman there for nine years.

When I think of soliciting advice, I am reminded of a story I tell in my book, *25 Ways to Peak Performance*:

A captain wanted to cross a river; however, he was unsure of its depth. He saw a local boy standing near and asked for the boy's advice. The boy looked at the legs of the captain's horse and said, “You will make it easy.” The captain followed the advice only to find himself and his horse nearly drowning. He shouted angrily at the boy.

The boy replied, “I see ducks crossing all the time and they have much shorter legs than your horse!”

Listen up and you will find that you are surrounded with a lot of Sound Advice. The problem is that it is 99% Sound and 1% Advice. You must know the difference before you act on it. How are your employees responding to the flood of negative input? Are they growing or are they placing limitations on themselves as a result of the advice? Consider how some more of my favorite people handled “sound advice”:

- *“You have a nice voice, but it’s nothing special.”*
–What a teacher said when rejecting Diana Ross after she auditioned for a part in a high school musical.
- *“You have the perfect voice for broadcasting, but you should get a job as a secretary. We’re not using women.”*
–What announcers for NBC Radio told Sally Jessy Raphael when she applied for a job after graduation from Columbia U. Getting fired from 18 jobs and living on food stamps, she heard “no” a lot before becoming a national celebrity.
- *“You can’t play the piano, and God knows you can’t sing. You’d better learn how to weave chairs so you can support yourself.”*
–A comment by Ray Charles’ teachers.
- *“It’s too hard to crack into late-night ratings. Television isn’t ready for a black talk show host. This is America, and you can forget it.”*
–Conventional “wisdom,” prior to Arsenio Hall’s acceptance of Paramount’s offer to host a late-night talk show.
- *“You will never make the cover of Vogue because you don’t have blonde hair or blue eyes.”*
–A remark to Cher by photographer Richard Avedon. When Cher did appear on the cover, Vogue sold more copies than it had ever sold before.

Remember that you get what you pay for when you get free advice. Why is advice so cheap? Because the supply far exceeds the demand. Of course, in business, we all demand good advice. So how should you go about getting it?

“Plans fail for lack of counsel but with many advisors they succeed.”

–Proverbs 15-22

We find that “many advisors” as opposed to going it alone really works. However, you make even better decisions when you limit the “many” to a select group of trusted advisors. With a peer advisory board such as The Alternative Board TAB, you can get that select group. TAB Members are not going to drown your horses because they know and understand your business and really care about you. It is not necessarily individual advice but the power of the collective wisdom, often from hundreds of years of business experience that you just can’t find anywhere else.

We face a challenging time ahead. It is no time to be alone. Surround yourself with the right advisors and pay close attention to how you respond to advice.