



A Positive State of Perpetual Apprehension

BY RANDY G. PENNINGTON

When you consider the world around you, are you aware and apprehensive? Or, do you often find yourself afraid? The difference is critical to your leadership success. Apprehension and awareness open your eyes to risks and opportunities. Being afraid can paralyze you.

Take, for example, natural gas production in the United States. Earlier this year, natural gas prices rebounded from ten-year lows, and at one point, they were up 18% over four trading sessions. Did you perceive that as good news or bad news?

If you are apprehensive, you would have consciously questioned the meaning and implications of the data. If you are aware, you would have known that natural gas prices were still 82% off of their record highs. And, you would have accurately predicted that large producers would continue to cut back on drilling. Based on that understanding, you might decide to cultivate new areas of business to protect your income. Or, you might choose to strengthen your presence in the natural gas industry as your competitors exit for greener pastures. However, if you are afraid, you are likely to make an impulsive decision based on fear. Or worse, you will do nothing at all until it is too late to mitigate the risk or take advantage of the opportunities that were feasible at the time.

Mastering the Skill

In today's uncertain world, the most effective leaders operate in a positive state of perpetual awareness and apprehension. While this will not guarantee that you won't make the wrong choice, your odds increase exponentially when you are proactive and engaged rather than passive and reactive. Here are three ideas to help you master this important leadership skill:

Scan continuously. Leaders who operate in a positive state of perpetual awareness and apprehension are like robots with laser scanners for eyes in science fiction movies. They move from object to object looking for relevant data and information. Then, they lock their full attention on that input until it is addressed or dismissed. They aren't distracted by irrelevant information or areas that should be addressed by others.

Become a true student of your business and its impact on the world around you. What are the threats to your success? What are the metrics and trends that you watch every day to identify potential opportunities before they become visible to everyone else? Your goal is to recognize subtle changes before they have presented themselves to others.

Question critically. Don't assume that things are as they appear on the surface. Apprehension requires you to dig deeper. The following three questions will help you think more critically about a threat or opportunity:

- What are the best case, worst case and most likely scenarios for how this will play out?
- What is the scope of the impact? Determine if it's a problem or an opportunity. In the end, you need to know how it impacts your long-term success.
- What is the timeframe and course of action required? Determine which course of action will result in the fewest or most controllable unintended consequences and what might happen if you wait for more information.

Act convincingly. Author and legendary motivational speaker Zig Ziglar was asked if he ever got nervous after all of his years in front of an audience. He responded that, while he still felt those butterflies before going on, he had learned to make them fly in formation.

The ability to act in a positive state of perpetual awareness and apprehension has become an essential leadership skill. So be cautious and aware. Recognize subtle changes in your business before they become obvious to everyone else. Identify your options early on and be proactive.

One reason Southwest Airlines has delivered 38 consecutive years of profits can be found in a statement by former CEO Herb Kelleher who said, "I have predicted eleven of the last three recessions."

Consider the words of Canadian pastor and author Basil King: "Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid." Those mighty forces will be followers inspired by your ability to perceive threats and opportunities where others see random activities or nothing at all.

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