

Anyone Around Here Nervous?

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Public relations guru Robert Dilenschneider on getting ahead when everyone else is concerned about falling behind.

by Art Kleiner

Robert Dilenschneider is well versed in how to succeed in competitive environments. The former CEO of Hill & Knowlton, one of the world's largest public relations firms, he has counseled many of the most powerful individuals and largest companies on maintaining their relevance in a business landscape where the sands shift with alarming regularity. Now the head of Dilenschneider Group Inc., his most recent book, *Power and Influence: The Rules Have Changed* (McGraw-Hill, 2007) offers a series of steps for advancing personal interests that will also help improve the performance of one's organization. Dilenschneider spoke to *strategy+business* about how individuals can adapt and prosper.

S+B: You have said that these are anxious times for individuals and business leaders. Why? What's influencing your growing sense that something worth worrying about is happening?

DILENSCHNEIDER: There are several issues at work here. Many Americans and western Europeans are somewhat terrified that Asia — principally India and China — is rising. And they are unable or unwilling to do anything about it. For example, the student in China spends 230 days a year in school, whereas the child in America is in the classroom for 129 days or so. A signif-

icant percentage of Chinese and Indians students take calculus and other advanced science and math courses. Less than 20 percent of American students do that. It is a major challenge for our next president.

The second big factor is technology. Many workers don't understand how to control or deal with new technologies, which leads to a lot of anxiety. But the fact is that mastering the basics of technology is not hard and, once done, it opens doors and creates opportunities.

The third factor is the continuing entry of women into the global workforce. The added competition puts a lot of pressure on people currently in jobs, but this new group of people also unlocks a level of creativity that could spur society forward.

The fourth factor is the uncertain economy; many families in the U.S. need two wage earners now to make it.

The fifth factor is savings. In the U.S. people save nothing, whereas in developing countries people are saving a lot.

S+B: Why is it important to understand these trends?

DILENSCHNEIDER: It's important so you can figure out what to do about these trends and how not to be cowed by them, and so you can learn how to embrace them to your benefit rather than run from them to your detri-

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 history of corporate change, *The Age
 of Heretics*, will be published by Wiley
 Books in 2008.

ment. For example, older men and women in particular should feel great about the presence of new communications technologies because they have an advantage; the older generation has been schooled in the development of reasoned arguments. Very few college students today take basic courses in logic or philosophy, the way my generation did when we were in school. So older men and women can prosper in the new communications networks, because substance trumps technology.

You can put out a Weblog or post a piece on Facebook or YouTube, but if it's boring and dull, no one gives a damn. A lot of the writing you see online has thinking that's disjointed and unsupported. And if it's not well reasoned, people are just going to say, "So what?" Younger men and women often don't get that. They sometimes point to — I've actually seen this happen — e.e. cummings or other writers like him and say, "Well, you don't have to be logical. There doesn't have to be a topic sentence and examples to support your ideas." That is perhaps true for some ideas, but, on balance, you've got to be able to support what you say with cogent arguments. That's why I say, if older people who can appreciate the need for proper rhetoric would just stop fearing technology, it could rebound to their benefit.

S+B: This suggests that the source of strength for people in business is actually themselves as individuals. It's not their organization or its power structure. Is that really true?

DILENSCHNEIDER: Yes, it is. People are on their own now whether they're in a big company or a small company. Employees used to operate in the workplace with safety nets. If things didn't work out, they were transferred or given less work until they retired. There used

to be a place to land. Not anymore. For better or worse, there are very few safety nets out there today. It's a very unforgiving world.

Accountability is now reaching down to the individual level. The work unit is no longer a group in which the individual can be virtually anonymous. Consider a big company today, when an analyst pulls it apart to determine which are the bad units holding the organization back, peeling back the layers of the business units to expose the divisions and eventually the people themselves who are screwing up. A really good manager recognizes there is now much more transparency and no avoiding being fingered for slowing things down if you don't operate on all cylinders all the time. The employees are also beginning to realize that now they cannot hide ineptitude. And so they're moving to a higher standard, a higher level.

When employees move to a higher performance level, they can influence the organization. And I think that the managers who realize that — who understand how to motivate people who view themselves as individuals with some degree of power within the organization — are going to be very successful. Managers who don't understand this, and there are a lot of them, are going to have real problems. The boss who calls people in and says, "We're doing it this way, 'A, B, C,'" and who repeats "A, B, C," when his worker says, "Well, what about D?" — he or she is going to have a hard time. In this new period of accountability, the manager will be found out. An inability to lead and to get the most out of individuals will be revealed. If a manager is open to accepting new ideas from his or her workers, such a manager is also open to accepting part of the blame if things don't work out perfectly as planned.

That's a good thing for the organization, and for the individual. It gives people a shared responsibility for the enterprise.

S+B: The definition of power in your view would be something like the confidence and judgment to act? And the definition of influence would be the ability to communicate with people and meet them halfway?

DILENSCHNEIDER: That's right. If you are competent at what you are doing and make efforts to continuously effect even tiny, incremental improvements, you will have power in the workplace — no matter what your anxieties are about the trends that you believe are lined up against you. And only then will you have the potential to gain significant influence within your organization.

S+B: You have said, "There are those who make things happen, there are those who watch what happens, and there are those who wonder what happened." But is it really necessary for everybody in the workplace to be a person who "makes things happen?"

DILENSCHNEIDER: No. There are some people who wind the stem of the watch and who make things happen, virtually every day. But the vast majority of people are those who watch what happens and — to make an important distinction — participate. The people who participate with the stem-winder are very important, because everyone can't be a chief. The role of the troops that take direction is critical if they follow with just as much competence, confidence, and often empowerment and value as their leaders demonstrate. They're like the members of a unit in the army. The leader may say, "We're going to take the ridge. And here's how we're going to do it." Well, if you don't operate as a team,

that's not going to happen. If just one person on the team breaks down, the whole team breaks down.

It's okay to be either a leader or an informed and aware follower; you can achieve success as either one. But what you don't want to be in this age of anxiety — in truth, a very difficult period for individuals — is someone who is merely wondering what is happening. +

Resources

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