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About Being Resourceful

SOME PEOPLE have the idea that they make progress in a factory or an office by "fitting in". Resourceful people believe in getting ahead by standing out.

They make the best of their abilities and the tools and equipment they have at hand for the job they are doing, and they give a thought to what they may need to know or to do in the event of an unforeseen occurrence. They are preparing now so that they can produce workable solutions to future problems.

The entrepreneur — the business man who is aiming to make a profit at the risk of loss — the main-spring of all business and industry — has to be resourceful. He has every right to expect the same quality in those who are employed by his firm, each in his special job. Every employee needs to work as a member of a team, but he needs individuality, too.

Being resourceful involves doing something. Those who fail to act on a problem, and carry the inner conflict forward from day to day, live under constant emotional strain and give less than full value in their work.

Instead of intoning the mournful lament "these things are sent to try us" they should declare with zest: "these trials are sent to give us opportunities to show our good points." Obstacles bring out the best in resourceful people.

The first resourcefulness in human beings evidenced itself when the savage learned that it is shorter to cross a stream than to go around its source; that a stone stays where it is unless something moves it, and that it drops from the hand which lets it go; that if he strikes a fellow savage a blow he will make him angry and probably get a blow in return. Here we have, as Thomas H. Huxley points out in *Method and Results*, the outlines of mathematics, physics, chemistry, and moral science. These early discoveries, expanded and developed, still serve us.

Resignation to an undesirable state of affairs is not the way of the resourceful person. He has a pliant mind, ready to accommodate itself to new needs. When an abnormal condition calls upon him to deal with it, he may have to change the elements of it somewhat, and he may have to change himself some-

what, but by one means or another he will stay on top of the situation.

Nothing, good or bad, remains static. Change is the normal state in the world today, and a person needs to be resourceful in altering his plans to meet new circumstances. When reason and judgment tell us to give up a course of action and start afresh on some new line, it is intellectually stupid to persist. The successful business man is one who readily adapts himself to the changing business world, just as the well adjusted individual is one who readily fits himself to a changing social world.

When he adapts quickly to new circumstances he is displaying a kind of genius for living. Most of the men who built buggies were absorbed into the automobile industry, but those who insisted upon making buggy wheels found themselves out of jobs.

The dictionary defines "resource" as "skill in devising expedients, practical ingenuity, quick wit." The resourceful man calls upon all his resources: experience, knowledge, intelligence and originality, and he adds confidence.

Expect the unexpected

We look with pleasure upon the occasions when we have time to formulate a clear view of what is needed, what the cost will be, and what the consequences will be of the course we take, but a good deal happens in everyone's life that he has not counted on, some of it good, some of it bad.

No amount of thinking can imagine or grasp all of every circumstance, so it is a good rule to expect the unexpected. None of us knows, when he picks up the telephone or opens an envelope, what new experience may be awaiting him.

A person may know how to handle the ordinary problems and difficulties connected with his job, but one day a situation arises which has a quirk in it, something he had not foreseen. He may be a great baseball fielder, but every once in a while a tiny pebble on the infield bounces one over his head.

An emergency is a sudden crisis demanding imme-

diate action. It is likely a situation that is bad and will get worse unless stop-gap action is taken instantly and remedial measures started promptly. It leaves no time to look up the drill in a book: a man is on his own without benefit of consultants or committees. If he is quick to perceive what has to be done he is half way home.

There are times of terrible urgency when the seemingly impossible becomes necessary. The resourceful person is quick to shift into high gear of thought and action. He intuitively separates the essential from the unessential, compares this situation with others he has experienced, and begins work on the pieces of it he can fix. He may have to make a tentative stab, choosing one of the alternatives and trying it out. He may find that the only thing to fall back upon is hope and faith, and that is a sort of resourcefulness.

Many problems are not clear-cut and do not yield to routine procedures, but it is safe to say that most large problems can be disposed of by solving the smaller ones of which they are composed.

When you analyze a problem — break it down — you crystallize your view of it. You get inside it so as to see its real nature. Start at a known point or with a known angle: that is the basis of all navigation on the sea and in space and in thinking.

Recognize, state, solve: these are the three necessities in clearing up any problem.

Clarifying the problem by putting it into words is a step toward finding the answer. You can wrestle the facts around in your mind or on paper until you find a soft spot, then pounce on it, break it open, and see what you can do with it.

Do not forget to consider alternatives, a practice that increases your chance of finding a solution. And when the solution pops into your mind, check it for its efficacy and its validity.

Edward Hodnett says wisely in *The Art of Problem Solving* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1955): "The fastest and best method of finding the answer to a simple problem is often through trial and error. This axiom is disputed by many women, who think talking about it is more interesting, and by many men, who think they should refer it to a committee."

Tools of the trade

Resourcefulness is not a quality that you pluck from the air, but is based on knowledge. Knowledge is the material stored in your mind; resourcefulness is your readiness to use it.

There is an old saying: "The habit does not make the monk". Neither does a diploma make a doctor, a business manager or a craftsman. Knowledge must be accompanied by judgment and skill.

A person who has only book learning is like the man who learned marksmanship by shooting clay pigeons and is suddenly faced with the challenge to shoot live birds. The trapshooting has taught him how to handle

the gun and how to aim at objects that move in a uniform pattern. Now he is confronted with targets of independent initiative over which he exercises no control and whose vagaries he cannot predict.

Next to knowledge, experience counts. Take note of your recollection of similar cases so as to recognize what elements of earlier similar events you recognize in the present problem. Make sure that past experience is applicable to the present case. Unless possible new factors are taken into account, action based upon old experience may be destructive.

One may have only mediocre powers of thought and action, but cultivation of them, application to their extension, and perseverance, will enable him to build resourcefulness so as to accomplish remarkable things. It is worth thinking about problems that may arise, because a person who is called upon to act is more likely to act fortunately the more he has previously meditated upon actions of a similar kind. One man, asked if he could play the piano, replied: "I don't know; I never tried."

Use intelligence

Intelligence, which is the faculty of knowing and reasoning, is an asset in any situation, but there will be crises in which one must act on instinct because thinking takes too much time. Normal instincts may be thought of as inherited knowledge quickly tapped by an appropriate occurrence.

This biological inheritance of primitive reactions is not to be despised, though no wise person will trust to it absolutely. Instinct presses us to action under necessity, knowing nothing of deliberation and not stopping to take account of obstacles. It could be said that we survive by instincts but we make progress by intelligence.

A distinguishing characteristic of intelligence is the ability to discover relevant connections and to give order and direction to action. It was development of intellect in the human race which gave man the ability to survive in a world where physically stronger creatures were passing into fossils.

The intelligent person does not believe in the doctrine of luck-chance, but in the law of cause and effect. The events that we call chance occurrences are not uncaused, though they may interfere with our planned progress apparently at haphazard.

Some people who gain a reputation for resourcefulness are in reality far-sighted people who use their intelligence to foresee the course of events. What is to those around them a situation caused by chance is something that they recognize as being sure to happen because of the course being followed.

The critical step in handling any challenging occurrence is making the decision about what to do. No one can be successful in business or private life unless he is able to make decisions backed by resolution. The important thing is to do what your good judgment tells you offers some probability of success, even though

you know that if you were given time to think and to plan you might come up with a better scheme.

Be ingenious

Ingenuity is an important tool. It involves a flexible nature and freedom from the strait jacket of prescribed procedures. William Hazlitt said in one of his essays: "Cleverness is a certain knack or aptitude at doing certain things; ingenuity is genius in trifles." There is abundant opportunity for the workman as well as the manager to display ingenuity and inventive skill.

Here are two examples. A Japanese student of metallurgy possessed an English book on blast furnaces, an English-Dutch dictionary, and a Dutch-Japanese dictionary. With these, he built and operated a blast furnace for smelting iron ore. When a train was snow-bound in Ontario, a trainman made snow-shoes out of rails from a picket fence and several men used them to tramp over the snow-drifts to get help.

Close to ingenuity is improvisation. The man who can improvise is fixing things up while the man of routine is seeking a precedent or studying the pages of a "How To Do It" book.

Makeshift may have to do until a permanent adjustment can be made, and cleverness in using it contributes greatly to the art of living. Improvisation is the talent of invention in its most primitive form. Are there no tools? Improvise them. Is there no handbook of instruction? Feel your way by trial and error. Knock down every obstacle by inventiveness, ingeniousness and innovation. Be fertile in expedients. Life offers no more satisfying experience.

Once the need becomes known and we have decided what course to take we have to become involved. Here is where we can demonstrate our worth, something we can never do if we remain spectators.

The resourceful person is one who can bring all his machinery of knowledge and theory and experience to the sharp cutting edge of direct action quickly upon sensing the need. He would be a foolish person who refused to accept the testimony of smoke and waited until he saw the flames before reaching for a fire extinguisher.

A situation may be so poorly defined that a man is propelled into action without any plan or equipment but only the overriding thought that it is better to do anything rather than nothing. Lieutenant Hornblower said in one of C.S. Forester's tales: "I'd rather be in trouble for having done something than for not having done anything."

It is helpful in tackling any strange or pressing job to believe that you can do it. The resourceful man stands out in the crowd because he is self-impelled. While others are peering through the mist of surprise and the fog of panic he goes to work, trusting in his own strength and relying on the correctness of his own judgment. His self-confidence measures the extent of his possibilities.

Qualities needed

Besides tools and techniques, the self-reliant person needs certain qualities: calmness, analytic skill, sagacious choice, originality, courage, and common sense.

Handling a business deal, an important event or an emergency, demands coolness and steadiness. Carefulness is part of the resourceful man's make-up but not "safety first".

Many persons are accustomed to dealing with exigencies like mechanical breakdowns, bottle-necks, fires, and other challenging occurrences. They take them as incidents, without fuss or exaggeration. Such people are symbolized in the low-key title given the book by Captain Russell Grenfell, R.N., in which he tells about the dramatic break-out of the German battleship Bismarck to prey on Atlantic convoys and the ocean-wide chase by British warships that located and sank her. This epic of sea warfare is entitled *The Bismarck Episode*.

People are never more themselves that in great crises. Under extreme tension they have no protective coloration, no camouflage. If a man has what it takes to be resourceful, and remains cool, he will be able to do all that he is capable of doing.

The resourceful person does not necessarily act impulsively, although he may do so in an emergency. He knows what he is trying to do, he does what is needed to be done instinctively or by training, and he determines in the shortest possible time the resources and the appropriate procedures.

The first essential step in setting something right is to find out what is wrong, what happened and what is needed. Obviously, what is normal must be known before one can tackle, or even recognize, a departure from it.

To ask yourself questions of the right kind is part of putting your resources to work. It brings the situation into focus. It spurs your imagination toward thinking of the most effective action.

If there is time you will make a list of the choices open to you. This is standard practice for all problem solving. First, you shake together a number of ideas, and then you select among them.

Be daring and prudent

Sometimes we see nothing but an option of difficulties. We know that the power of choosing involves the possibility of error, but on the other hand the failure to choose can cause disaster.

When there is no certainty visible, it is wise to do what promises to be best in its effect so far as you can see. As Machiavelli, the Florentine statesman and political philosopher, said in *The Prince* "Prudence consists in knowing how to distinguish the character of troubles, and for choice to take the lesser evil."

Sometimes the resourceful person has to take off-beat measures. Under the special circumstances he

must not allow himself to be boxed in by the narrow boundaries of the conventional, but he will bestir himself to cope with the exigency through originality and ingenuity.

Add to all your other qualities that of common sense. Every attempt to be resourceful in handling a situation involves thinking: even a man who is a genius in his profession cannot wilfully disregard the use of common sense.

An article in *Technology Review*, the magazine of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, tells about an engineer who calculated that he needed a 50-cubic-yard concrete foundation under a support, and proceeded to blast out 50 cubic yards of solid rock into which to pour the concrete.

Courage is the last of the qualities to be mentioned. The paramecium is an animal that finds its way about simply by keeping out of trouble: but who wants to be a paramecium? Courage to try something new, to defy danger when that seems to be the direct way toward an objective, this is needed by the resourceful person.

This is not to say that you should go looking for risk. A resourceful man acting a dangerous part does not disdain having a net spread under him so that if he falls he falls safe. That is intelligent caution.

Courage does not consist in refusing to admit danger when the danger is there. Courage avoids taking foolhardy or frivolous risks. Courage is strength of mind that gives you the physical strength to act. Courage is the self-esteem that gives you the urge to undertake a job without waiting for others who might bear part of the blame for failure.

Pile up resources

Resourcefulness is not for use only in emergencies and catastrophes. It is used in planning for normal life and work. It anticipates.

When you keep an eye on what is going on, communicating the information to your subconscious, you are piling up resources of knowledge to be used in carrying out your purposes.

An ounce of prevention, says the proverb, is worth a pound of cure. By being prepared for all events, the worst as well as the best, you prevent hurry and surprise. It is wiser to take the measures necessary to avoid a crisis than to wait for confusion to set in. This might be called solving problems in advance.

When you plan a job you are controlling many unknowns, or you are evading them, and this is resourcefulness. Set up a reserve. Everyone feels better when he has ideas and plans in reserve. What does it matter if some are never used? Look at the ammunition dumps of antagonists after a war. The biggest pile of shells is on the winning side because the victors did not have occasion to shoot these shells before their opponents surrendered.

Resourcefulness may be preparation. The person who thinks ahead to what he may have to do under various circumstances and what materials he may need

is putting resourcefulness to work in anticipation so that he shall not be caught wholly unprepared. To look ahead, to scan the factory and office and home for places and situations where trouble might arise: that is not nervous apprehension but skilful management.

Tackle the impossible

A resourceful person is reluctant to admit that something desirable is impossible, and he will examine very closely anything that popular voice says cannot be done. While other people are sitting around taking dismal views, he will say "let us see what possibilities there are in this situation." He is a possibilitarian.

Following authority and the textbook may be the easy way of coping with an ordinary problem, but many worth-while things which authority has declared to be impossible have been accomplished by a resourceful person.

What a person does in spite of circumstances and without step by step guidance, is a measure of his ability. James Stillman, who was president of the National City Bank, when asked what interested him most in life, replied: "It is to plan some piece of work that everybody says cannot possibly be done, and then jump in with both feet and do it."

Some people have the habit of trying the impossible. As H. H. Munro wrote in *The Chronicles of Clovis*: "When once you have taken the impossible into your calculations its possibilities become practically limitless."

Pick up the pieces

Recovery from an accident or an emergency of any kind requires as much resourcefulness as stopping the progress of it.

To pick up the pieces, to repair what is spoiled, and start over, is a noble act. John James Audubon, the ornithologist, left a box containing 200 of his beautiful drawings at home when he went on a business trip. Upon his return he found that a pair of rats had entered the box and gnawed the paper on which he had drawn a thousand birds. Audubon was prostrated for several days by the shock, then he took up his notebook and pencils and went out into the woods. "I felt pleased," he said, "that I might now make better drawings than before."

Look, now, at the qualities of a resourceful person. He starts to think long before the critical situation arises. He refuses to allow his mind to become standardized. He trains himself in being quick to realize what is involved. Using his natural equipment of instinct and intelligence, plus knowledge and developed skills and ingenuity, he is ready to act with assurance when a situation requires action.

Perception of the need, the decision to do something, and starting to do it are closely linked in the person who is resourceful. He is really enjoying the fullness, the excitement, and the reward of creative living.