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Review

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The Genius of Tom Peters

By Wendy Nemitz

Dr. Tom Peters addressed the *Lessons in Leadership* audience this March and had a lot to say about reinventing work. **Tom Peters never lets anyone get comfortable.** He is a gadfly, poking complacency anywhere he finds it and letting out hot air. He is also the author of many best selling business books, including his classic *In Search of Excellence*, *The Circle of Innovation*, *Crazy Times*, *Call for Crazy Organizations*, and the *Brand 50* series.

Peters documents how the hot air is being let out of the white collar economy. He told us that in 1974 it took 108 people five days to unload an average large ship at the London docks. Because of containerization, it now takes eight people one day. Technology sucked all of those human hours out of the work of unloading a ship.

The same is happening now in the white collar world. **Computers and other technology are sucking all kinds of human hours out of the white collar system.** At Dell Computers, the network literally makes decisions that formerly took several layers of management. When it is reported that a load of monitors is being held up due to weather, the computer system automatically searches all monitor suppliers to fill existing orders. If they do not have the exact monitor the customer ordered, substitute monitors with a discount will automatically be offered to the customer via email.

This type of decision used to take at least one salesperson, the sales manager, and several others to make. Now the computer makes the decision and does all the work in just a few seconds. Where will all of those people hours go? **Just as many blue collar workers suffered huge dislocations of**

formerly well-paying jobs in the 1970's and 80's, white collar workers will have to adapt to the changing world or suffer.

Peters envisions a world of “portfolio workers,” who jump nimbly from project to project, scanning their rolodexes for the right networking partners and power lunching themselves into the next project up. It looks like all kinds of white collar workers are in for some pain on the road to the future.

The other main gospel according to Peters is that it is nearly impossible for the large companies already in existence to reinvent themselves enough to really fend off competition. He used a quote from Mark Twain to illustrate: “The best swordsman in the world does not need to fear the second best swordsman; no, the person for him to be afraid of is some ignorant antagonist who has never had a sword in his hand before; he doesn't do the thing he ought to do, and so the expert isn't prepared for him; he does what he ought not to do and often it catches the expert out and ends him on the spot.”

Sears never counted on a guy from Arkansas and now Wal-Mart is America's largest retailer. Sears has layers of infrastructure preventing the rapid change that Wal-Mart implemented easily as a new company.

Peters' solution is to make the CEO into the CDO or Chief Destruction Officer. **He told us that if we are not actively inventing ways to destroy our businesses, someone else will.**

Peters also offered the solution of letting small groups of people spin off from the main company and be assigned the project of inventing products or solutions that will challenge how their company does business. They should be placed as far from the innovation-killing main office as possible.

In order to foster innovation in large organizations, he recommends hiring freaks and kooks and letting them stir the pot. He said that if you hire a 4.0 GPA college graduate with perfect attendance, you are hiring someone who follows rules, not someone who breaks them. **Surviving the times requires people who can break out of the box.**

Peters also makes a case for the buying power of American women, which apparently is the largest and most powerful group of buyers in the world. He tells hilarious stories about women trying to buy cars and how only Saturn seems equipped to work well with women. He specifically talked about a senator from California inspecting a new Mercedes at a dealership. When the salesman finally approached her, he said, “Honey are you sure you can afford this vehicle?” Every woman in the Peters seminar laughed and most of their heads were nodding. When I bought my own car a few years back I had several similar experiences, including one idiot who refused to tell me the trade-in offer on my old car until I signed a contract to purchase a new one. Needless to say, I left.

Peters makes the case that all kinds of goods and service vendors—banks, financial services, insurance, car dealerships—should specifically train their sales staff to work well with women. He does not mean painting the showroom pink, but rather understanding the relationship worldview many women bring to transactions.

Selling to women is one of our areas of expertise. Call 651 690 3358 if you are interested in finding out how we can help you build your business.

Peters' website, www.TomPeters.com is highly recommended for browsing.