

## J. Michael Locke

### Musings

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#### #31: The Insights from Observation and Going Retail

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In today's world of excessive stimuli, it is easy to get lazy and not observe closely. You can miss valuable nuggets amidst the volume. Don't let this happen. Think of it like looking for gold. According to Google, "most people who go out panning do not find any gold at all. The reason for this is simple: *they don't go down into the sediment far enough.*"

A short anecdote to drive this home. I was once touring a college campus in Florida with an administrator and we walked by a room with a group of students looking at a large screen in front with a faculty member presenting via video (while this may seem normal in our Covid world, but this was a 15 years ago.) I stopped our walk and asked the administrator what was going on. Apparently, a faculty member had invented a format he called the "flat instructor" where he leveraged expertise from around the country and had them teach class via video. I asked to talk to the inventing instructor and fast forward and this technique was deployed in campus locations across the country. Individual acts of innovation can go unleveraged because the creator doesn't realize how special it is. The leader must get into the field and observe.

You must observe everything. The cluttered physical desk is a warning flare for me. How can an executive be on top of their game if they can't organize their space? The cluttered computer desktop is the same. Having 30+ icons on the desktop is the virtual equivalent and shows a lack of focus and too much multi-tasking. Running late is another one. Anyone who is late for an interview should not even get one. The talented prospect will get organized ahead of time, know directions and build in flex time in case there is an accident.

A great technique is to put yourself on the mailing list for any distributions from your organization (Heather taught me this one with our Christmas card distribution.) See how it comes to you as if you were the consumer. An analog is to respond to advertising inquiries from your organization. Once I called the phone number on a billboard for one of our organizations and the number was wrong!

A simple method is to call team members "lower" in the organization chart and ask "what is going on?" If you have been an authentic and personal leader, you will know these individuals and have a relationship such that a call will not be awkward. With the advent of the cell phone, every minute in a car is a minute you can be "going retail and observing" by calling people and talking to them. If an executive between you and the recipient of these calls complains and says "come to me if you want something and not my team," you have a big warning. As long as you aren't giving directions, there should be no problem with you talking to team members. I have found that the complaining executive is often trying to control messaging and worried you are going to discover they have been "shading" things to look better than they are.

Leaders can't just sit in fancy rooms with lots of smart people and wax philosophical. They need to be in the field, at the ground level, looking at displays on store shelves and calling billboard numbers. You don't have to be *Undercover Boss*. One higher education leader I respect would sit with the student services professionals taking phone calls. My friend runs a transportation company and talks to the drivers after their routes as they fill-up with gas (learned during his military service where I believe it is called an "after-action review"). My mentor Bob King would show up early to the IBM branch to grab coffee and talk to "lower level staff" before the big executive meeting.

Leaders need to get out there, observe closely and listen carefully. You will be amazed what you learn that isn't in your KPI reports.

Be safe.

Jml

### *Second Thought*

My first professional mentor was a Partner at Sullivan & Cromwell named Bob Craft. One thing he taught me was to "go to weddings and funerals. Make it happen. It means a lot to people." Bob's son Gerard is a Beard award-winning chef in St. Louis. He wrote a good piece on his growth from individual performer to leader and the value of team called "Why My Kitchen Went from Oui to We" which you can read [here](#).