

10-2012

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael (2012) "SEIZING OPPORTUNITY: A SPECIAL INVITATION COLLECTION," *Administrative Issues Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/aij/vol2/iss2/3>

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SEIZING OPPORTUNITY: A SPECIAL INVITATION COLLECTION

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The AIJ editorial board constantly looks for ways to keep the journal professionally relevant. With this in mind, we approached Dr. Michael Williams, Associate Dean of the MBA Program for the School of Business and Technology at Thomas Edison State College, about writing an introduction to our 2012 conference theme, Seizing Opportunities. Dr. Williams is a scholar-practitioner who offers a unique philosophical insight into the import of seizing opportunities in our professional and personal lives. He was excited about exploring the theme for this issue through the lens of change as a nexus of opportunity. We hope you find this special invitation section both useful and inspiring.

Outside noisy, inside empty

Chinese Proverb

Suddenly, you realize your life may never be the same. An opportunity has been presented. Be it planned or serendipitous is unimportant. What is important is your perception of its power and potential to influence your life. Its presence may stimulate a rush of new ideas or conjure up associated past experiences and outcomes. For a moment, your world may be filled by a creative tempest rich in possibility and full of self-discovery, your personal and professional power unleashed. In a moment of clarity, you may find yourself thinking differently, rationally and innovatively uncompromisingly aware of emergent life themes grounded in your perception of the opportunity.

Increasingly, you become aware of your tolerances for risk, reward, and investment. Gradually, the momentum of this perceptual experience slows, and degrees of situational normalcy return. However, your experience with the opportunity is not done; rather, the opportunity is not done with you. Through its consideration, you've changed—nuancefully-altered, perhaps transported toward a new possible self. The opportunity's power and potential to influence how you think and behave may have taken root. You are not the same person you were prior to the opportunity's presentation. You realize your life will never be the same.

Opportunities can be at once disarming and exhilarating; their content elegant, profound, and disturbing. Opportunities provide openings for decision, decisions predicated on the quantity and quality of data associated with an opportunity. For example, opportunities can present as partially defined, undeveloped fragments of an emergent product concept or a robust and refined business plan ready for implementation.

Regardless of their presentation, opportunities prompt us to make decisions, and the result of our decision or indecision will be change. Each opportunity that presents to us brings with it *contexts-of-change*. Contexts-of-change are potentials, unique alignments between an opportunity and our knowledge and skills that, if properly used, can enable us to benefit from engaging the opportunity. Again, for example, if we decide to seize a business opportunity, we may gain a marketplace competitive advantage by leveraging the unique alignments between the opportunity and our knowledge and skills at business building. However, if we decide to reject or not to make a decision concerning an opportunity, it may remain viable and available to others. If so, the opportunity could pass from our context-of-change. In its passing, we would forfeit its unique alignments with us. It then may present to others, making pos-



sible its engagement within their context-of-change.

Opportunity stimulates change. Change can be rapid, discontinuous, and noisy. With its motion and clatter, change can distract our attention from evaluating the merit and value associated with an opportunity. Moreover, in order to decide to engage an opportunity, we need to gauge its power and potential, understand the accompanying risks, rewards, and investment necessary to realize a desired result, and assess whether the opportunity's context-of-change is uniquely aligned with our capabilities. Therefore, we must be receptive to opportunities in our lives and be reflective concerning the challenges and benefits they present. As the proverb states, *Outside noisy, inside empty*. Avoid cacophony. Seek quietude when deciding to engage an opportunity. Your decision could influence the direction and outcomes of your life.

CHANGE: ARCHITECT OR VICTIM?

In his 1992 book *Managing at the Speed of Change*, change author Daryl Connor asserted that "Change provides us with the opportunity to architects or victims of our own future." Change highlights potentials inherent in opportunity. Frequently, opportunity serves as a medium for potential: an environment in which environmental stimuli, desired outcomes, and unanticipated elements interact, combining to form an amalgam of possibility and alchemy of change. As Connor indicates, "change provides us with opportunities," calling for our decision and action. For example, we can decide to accept or ignore, chase or seize opportunities. The potential we perceive in opportunities influences the efficacy of our decisions. Perceptions are subjective. They are influenced by emotion, bias, and limited information. Our perceptions influence our belief systems. Our belief systems are the final arbiter of our decisions concerning how we address opportunity.

Belief systems are complex and influential. What we believe about an opportunity may spur us to seize it. Seizing is a powerful and determined act that may be defined in many ways. For example, seizing can be interpreted as "taking by force," "lay hold of suddenly," and "to understand fully and distinctly" (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*). When seizing an opportunity, we frequently "take it by force." Unfortunately, we may not fully understand its power and potential to irrevocably alter our lives.

Culturally, seizing opportunities has been portrayed as a daring endeavor; rife with passion, commitment, and purpose. In contemporary culture, seizing opportunities in our personal and professional lives is bannered in the phrase "Carpe Diem" or "Seize the day." This phrase was made famous in the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society*, when English teacher John Keating exhorted his students to "Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary." In the movie Keating entices his students with "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. The Latin term for that sentiment is Carpe Diem... Seize the day." Why does the writer use these lines?" Keating continues, "Because we are food for worms lads. Because, believe it or not, each and every one of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die."

Keating's enticement, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may," is the opening line of the 17th century English poet Robert Herrick's poem, *To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time*. In his poem, Herrick advises to seize life while young and full of life:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

Herrick's stanza draws upon the work of Roman poet Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, 65-8 B.C.E.), who wrote in Book I of his *Odes* (35 B.C.), "Even while we speak, envious time has passed: seize or [pluck] the day, putting as little trust as possible in tomorrow!" While this phrase is articulated in many ways, its sentiment is clear: Seize the day; seize the opportunity.

Once seized, an opportunity is ours to develop, expand, and manage. Connor indicates that we can choose to be "architects or victims" of our decision to engage. While a seemingly a simple decision, its ramifications can be far from simple. As the time-worn axiom warns, "What we don't know can harm us." Frequently, at the time of our decision to

seize an opportunity, we do not possess a full understanding of how the opportunity might change our lives. However, as often happens, as we engage and shape the opportunity, it develops a character and momentum. It becomes animated, taking on a life of its own within or outside of our control. With animation comes change. Again, Connor reminds us, "Change provides us with the opportunity to be architects or victims of our own future." Which will we choose?

CULTURE, CHANGE, AND COGNITION: COACHING

There are a plethora of variables that influence the formation and emergence of opportunity. Three variables common to opportunity are culture, change, and cognition. Opportunities are culturally generated. Organizational cultures are tantamount to social and situational crucibles. These cultural crucibles are fueled by psychological, sociological, and anthropological dimension of culture. Culture supplies and fires the properties of opportunity and decision, making forging them into a unique composite of organizational thought and potential. Change contextualizes opportunity. It provides context for opportunity enabling it to evolve while introducing influencing variables such as randomness, order, and chaos. Cognition operationalizes opportunity. *How* and *what* we think about opportunities influences our behavior and ultimately the viability of results.

Culture, change, and cognition are critical variables influencing the conception, formulation, and acquisition of opportunity. However, while these variables are necessary to enabling opportunity to present to us, once we decide to seize it, they may or may not assist us in realizing its potential. As president Abraham Lincoln wrote concerning opportunity, "I will prepare and some day my chance will come." A recognized and recommended component of "preparing for chance" is coaching. Given the complexity of the 21st century global business environment, having a trained and seasoned coach helping to maximize the yield from an opportunity, in turn helping us realize our desired goal, can support our decision to seize an opportunity.

Beginning in 2008, Esther Muller, a Board Certified and Master Coach and I have been writing the Coaching Corner articles for *The Mann Report-Residential* real estate magazine published in New York City. In 2008, the nation was entering a prolonged recession. Financial markets were in turmoil, real estate prices plummeting, and mortgage lending contracting. As a result, real estate consumer fear escalated, and residential home transactions ground to a halt. These market conditions signaled the end of an era in the residential real estate industry, a period characterized by ever-rising prices, scarce inventory, and ample consumer capital and credit. From the fiscal crisis and recession of 2008, a *new order* of industry engagement emerged. Real estate professionals were now challenged to survive, succeed, and sustain working in an industry that was rapidly morphing into a new and uncharted professional landscape.

Culturally, organizational cultures were fragmenting under the stress of fracturing and wholly upended market conditions. No longer did the rules of organizational and client engagement used only weeks before apply. Instead, rules were replaced by no rules. Change, rapid and discontinuous, overpowered or derailed most institutional and government leaders' attempts to manage or control the escalating chaos characterizing the residential real estate market conditions. Cognitively, the magnitude and relentlessness of the changes in the global financial markets were difficult to comprehend, in turn significantly inhibiting leaders to make informed decisions and take decisive corrective action. Professionals in all industries appeared to hold the expectation that organizations' ability to cope with the world's economic and banking systems issues would either be seriously crippled or completely paralyzed by the events constituting the financial crisis.

As a result, critical thinking was in high demand. Organizational leaders were challenged to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the causes and impacts of the financial crisis and formulate strategies and tactics to mitigate its projected debilitating effects and provide their companies and institutions with stability and hope. Opportunity has been a central theme in the articles series. Article titles such as "Cultures of Competence: Coaching as Catalyst" (January, 2011), "From Learn to Do: Cognition and Learning" (March, 2012), and "From Evolution to Revolution: An Industry In Transformation" (January, 2010) explored opportunity—its presentation, seizing, and impact.

The 2012 *Administrative Issues Journal Conference* theme was Seizing Opportunities. Many of the Coaching Corner articles address this year's conference theme from a variety of perspectives. In the overview to this year's conference, Editor-In-Chief Dr. Tami Moser informed us that the conference leadership "explored the potential interpretations of



this broad theme [Seizing opportunities.]” She suggested that “Individuals involved in teaching may want to explore year’s AIJ conference theme in terms of seizing opportunities for their students, institutions, and themselves.” Increasingly, institutional leaders are employing individuals possessing critical thinking and entrepreneurial skills, believing these employees are better prepared to access and seize opportunities, in turn promoting business growth and enabling competitive advantage. It is in the context and spirit of “exploring the potential interpretations of this broad theme,” Seizing Opportunities, that I am presenting three Coaching Corner articles that provide unique interpretations of Seizing Opportunities with emphasis on culture, change, and cognition. The articles are “Courage As Catalyst” (June, 2012), “Opportunity as Transformation” (November, 2011), and “Succeeding to Fail: A Path to Transformation” (November, 2011).

As *Dead Poets Society*’s English teacher John Keating reminds us, “Carpe Diem. Seize the day.” By seizing the day we may find ourselves the architects, not victims, of our own future,” in turn creating the opportunities to fulfill Keating’s challenge to “Make our lives extraordinary.”

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