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People Management
Trust Me, Do Nothing!

By Kelly Hennigan

This is the second article in a three-part series[1] focused on the "Do Nothing" leadership approach presented by Professor J. Keith Murnighan, the Harold H. Hines Jr. Distinguished Professor of Risk Management at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. Murnighan is the author of the book *Do Nothing! How to Stop Overmanaging and Become a Great Leader*, and he promotes a synonymous leadership approach.[2]

Murnighan's book opens with a dream: **You have just returned to the office after a three-week vacation during which you did not take your cellphone and did not check emails.**

In order to make this dream a reality, Murnighan suggests that we need to have trust. BUT, trust entails taking risks. And, as actuaries, we are naturally risk-averse beings, making it difficult for our occupation to fully trust others. (Particularly the author, for what may appear to be overly simplistic advice!?!) The book recommends putting trust in our work colleagues in order to exemplify the "Do Nothing" approach to leadership.

A MATTER OF TRUST

"If (you) can trust anonymous strangers on eBay, how much should you trust the people you work with?"

—J. Keith Murnighan

In considering the general traits of an actuary, many of us are highly technical, detail-oriented, and have a sense of ownership about our work. This combination of characteristics, plus an introverted personality type, makes it challenging for us to relinquish control and trust others in the workplace. Oftentimes, we prefer to work independently and handle the details ourselves, rather than delegate to others. However, Murnighan encourages us to take the risk of trusting people.

Murnighan shares with the reader some of his eBay experiences and comments that despite his 1,200+ eBay interactions, only eight of these have been negative. He asks how one is able to put faith in complete strangers on eBay—who could be located across the country or even somewhere else in the world—to package up items to ship in a timely fashion. If it is possible to place your trust in the eBay system, then why not place your trust in your co-workers?

In relationships, both professionally and personally, we tend to trust people (or perhaps distrust people) the more we get to know them. The author logically comments, "Fear that comes with trust should dissipate quickly with familiarity or with evidence." We naturally have the instinct to reciprocate trust and be in mutually beneficial relationships (i.e., we trust people when we know them well and, in turn, they trust us).

Trust leads to other benefits as well. When team members trust each other and feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to speak up in meetings as well as interact with others across the organization—because they are motivated and comfortable with their environment. When leaders trust their teams, and the teams exhibit trust across their co-workers, it better positions those in management to follow the "Do Nothing!" approach to leadership. Murnighan states, "Leaders can naturally and easily think about their financial risks by weighing the upsides and the downsides. It's far less natural for them to think that their interactions with people have similar upsides and downsides."

However, individuals can be hesitant to put their trust in others due to fear of being hurt, as trust can be violated. When this occurs, it can disproportionately increase fears that it could be violated again in the future. Negative experiences (related to trust or even other off-putting behaviors) stand out in our minds more so than positive ones and therefore have a greater influence over our behavior and decision-making in the future.

TRUST YOURSELF

"There's no bigger burden than that of having great potential."

 —Linus from "Peanuts"

If we follow Murnighan's guidance, and trust our co-workers, what else remains in order for us to achieve this "Do Nothing" leadership ideology? Simply to trust in ourselves. This may appear in various situations and in different forms:

1. **Maintain structural control.** Trust in yourself to take on a sense of authority when leading or speaking at meetings. When leading, have an agenda set in advance with a goal in mind. Encourage people to share their perspectives, but herd any stray cats to ensure that the agenda is adhered to. Similarly, when speaking at a meeting, weave in your perspectives at the appropriate times on the agenda in order to impact any decision-making. Upon conclusion of a project, lead or participate in the post-mortem to learn what was done well/poorly. Were there any surprises? What could be done better next time?

2. Work faster. We can actually do many things quicker than we think. Oftentimes, we get sidetracked with other priorities. Or perhaps we just do not have the emotional willingness to tackle a cyclical reporting task. Or maybe the brand new project seems insurmountable to get off the ground. In these cases, we need to push ourselves or even have other forces (e.g., our managers or the senior leadership team) give us a push in the right direction. Getting that extra "oomph" may encourage us to believe in ourselves, thus resulting in that confidence boost we need to quickly accomplish the task at hand in a timely fashion.

3. Persevere, rather than perform. Achieving greatness as a leader requires passion, determination and making a conscientious effort to grow through continuous learnings. Rather than always focusing on performance targets, or fixed metrics of achievement, it is preferable to focus on learning goals that you can take with you in the longer term. In 2002, after the Philadelphia 76ers lost in the first round of the NBA playoffs to the Boston Celtics, Allen Iverson retorted, "How the hell can I make my teammates better by practicing?" This remark is in direct contrast to Murnighan's mantra to persevere and focus on lifelong learnings, rather than the numbers on the scoreboard in the shorter term.

4. Position yourself. At work, illustrate to others that you are a talented employee by creating value. Individuals need to trust in their unique abilities, as everyone has something different to bring to the table. We ideally want to surround ourselves with mutually beneficial relationships with others who know our abilities and appreciate them, and vice versa. However, do not be naïve to the fact that the world is always changing. Leaders and their teams need to consider how to adapt their skill sets over time to fit the needs of the future. That may require refocusing on other strengths, or perhaps even picking up a new skill set in order to keep relevant.

To conclude this portion of the series, Murnighan's approach to living the dream is essentially just a matter of trust—contingent upon trusting others and also on trusting yourself. The final installment[3] will focus on some unnatural leaders, as well as other learnings from Murnighan's "hands-off" leadership perspective. ■

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ENDNOTES

1 Part 1 in the series was published in the May 2016 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, available online at *www.SOA.org/ld*.

2 Murnighan, J. Keith. (2012). *Do Nothing! How to Stop Overmanaging and Become a Great Leader,* New York: Portfolio/Penguin.

3 Planned for the November 2016 issue of *The Stepping Stone.*