

The Courage to Act: Your "one big thing"



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US Vice Presidential Candidate Joe Biden talks too long. He loses his audience. His message loses its punch. Voters have told him this. So has the press. Now his new boss, Barak Obama, tells him the same thing.

Read blogs about Apple. None of their products are as user-friendly and ready-to-use as they claim. Loyal Apple users are frustrated and angry. The "one big thing" we ask of Steve Jobs? Get the bugs worked out before you stand up and introduce new products. And don't talk so big in your ads if your company can't deliver everything you promise.

The feedback couldn't be more clear. It isn't new. The consequences are costly. So why not fix it?

In preparation for the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashana, 29 Sept-01 Oct), our traditions command us to look squarely at our personal shortcomings. We're supposed to reach out to those who could give us 360-feedback, starting with anyone we think we've wronged, and make a commitment to change. Tradition says that our fate — and commitments — are sealed at the end of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which marks the end of the Jewish High Holidays (08-09 Oct).

Confession and atonement are cathartic. That's true true for any executive who's been part of one of the feedback activities we include in our Courage Institute workshops. And it's equally true for those of us who take the Jewish High Holidays seriously.

But catharsis, confession and atonement don't fix anything by themselves. It isn't enough for Joe Biden to know that he's long-winded. It's not enough for Steve Jobs to see that loyal customers are cynical and disillusioned with Apple. Or for some of us to acknowledge that our "one big thing" is getting impatient and annoyed with teammates who don't "get it" as quickly as we'd like.

Fixing your "one big thing" requires heavier lifting than catharsis. It may require coaching, to master new skills or find the "positive triggers" that will make new behavior as automatic and reflexive as your "one big thing" used to be.

It will definitely require greater self-control not just self-awareness. And a healthy dose of courage, to overcome momentum, excuses, laziness, lack of will or focus.

Are you apt to trivialize feedback with a dismissive reply like "It didn't tell me anything that I didn't already know?" If so, maybe it's time to push yourself harder and do something about your "one big thing." Change takes courage, not a miracle. It takes someone who believes in you and expects better of you — and someone who will guide you through the heavy lifting of mastering alternative behaviors, rather than accepting your excuses and enabling you to stay stuck.

With the right investment, Steve Jobs could call on Apple to step up and go to market with more integrity. He could use the next big product launch to show he takes our trust seriously. Joe Biden could change his "one big thing" in a day. He could use this campaign to encode new ways of "showing up" into his behavior. So can you.

According to Charles Darwin, "It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change." In this New Year season, we wish you the courage to make that happen.

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