



THE DOWNSIDE OF THE “PREVENT DEFENSE”

BY BARRY BROWNSTEIN

In the American game of football, there is a strategy that teams often employ in the fourth and last quarter—the “prevent defense.” If their team is ahead, some coaches shift their defensive and offensive play to an ultra-conservative mode in an attempt to run out the clock and win the game. But quite frequently this “safe” strategy backfires. In an attempt to prevent the other team from winning, the team that is ahead abandons the game plan that brought them to the lead. In the process, they often allow the other team to score, turning what seemed to be a sure win into a very close game; sometimes, they even give up their lead. This reversal can happen with breathtaking speed.

Similarly, many of us live our lives as though we are trying to run out the clock. Instead of using our strengths to achieve what we desire—and take some risks in the process—we take the safe route and vainly attempt to prevent failure. For instance, in our personal lives, we delude ourselves into believing that we will drop our prevent defenses and do work that we really care about after we achieve the next milestone—a promotion, a larger house, a college education for our kids. But what often happens is what a participant in one of the poet David Whyte’s seminars poignantly described: “Ten years ago I turned my head for a moment and it became my life.”

This individual understood that she had not taken advantage of the fact that our lives are emergent. One step leads to the next. An authentic life is like going up a darkened staircase. The third step is visible only after we step from the first step to the second step.

When we insist on being able to see the third step from the first step,

we become paralyzed and fossilized. One of my MBA students recently asked if it was a good rule to replace older workers with younger ones in order to increase corporate creativity. A young mind, I replied, can be as fossilized as an older one. However, because the fossilization process is in its earliest stages with people new to

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the workforce, it frequently goes unrecognized. But unfortunately, many of us make the choice as young adults to stop learning, to stop growing, and to become paralyzed, by insisting on guarantees rather than trusting the emergence of life.

When we are authentic, we set in motion events that compound themselves and lead to discovery and growth. In contrast, when we choose to lead a life characterized by prevent defenses, the choice we faced at 20 is there again at 30 and again at 40 and again at 50 and again at 60. The characters in our personal drama change, the organizations we work for change, but the choice to be authentic or to run out the clock is frozen at the same place with the same real content. By the same content, I mean that if at 30 we tried to insure that we would receive a promotion by always agreeing with what our manager said, we would face the same dilemma again at a later date. After a while, preventing failure can become a habit that inhibits discovery.

Organizational cultures employ prevent defenses too. All organizations

have a “culture”—an unwritten way of seeing and then responding to their business environments. The culture leads to a set of unspoken beliefs about the organization and how it operates—beliefs that drive people’s behavior in the organization. When the business environment changes—and it always does—these beliefs become increasingly problematic, because they no longer support the way the company must operate.

But examining our beliefs in order to change them is not something individuals do easily—it feels risky and opens us up to criticism from others. We often fall back on “This is how we do things here” to prevent examination of our underlying mental models. Rigid hierarchal structures that prevent dialogue also hinder organizational learning and reflection. But as long as the organization does not openly examine the beliefs that are holding it back from being more responsive to its environment, its prevent defenses will almost guarantee defeat.

“In defenselessness I will be strong, and I will learn what my defenses hide,” states A Course in Miracles. *If we give up our defenses for just a moment, new possibilities begin to reveal themselves and emerge.* These possibilities are treasures of which we have not yet dreamed, waiting to emerge in our lives, in our organizations, and in our economies. ■

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