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WHAT'S IMPORTANT | Volume V, Issue 2 | April 29, 2009

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***"What's Important" is a universal concern. The phrase resonates with an infinite number of meanings. What's important is both a question and an answer, depending on the situation.***

There's a lot to be said for playing it safe, especially in these troubled economic times. The waters are choppy out there, and surfing in this global economic tsunami could be dangerous.

The safe route may help us weather the storms, but it also means we won't ride the waves. A company can't invent or create its way out of a crisis if the leaders are focused exclusively on staying afloat, at the expense of swimming to calmer waters.

Even when the going is tough, companies that continuously value creativity and innovation will have more tools to draw upon to guide them toward fairer weather.

In his book "The Last Lecture," professor and innovator Randy Pausch offered a new perspective on facing the proverbial brick wall. In his mind, those brick walls that stand in our way of success can be great teachers, if we are able to view them as such.

In one of his classes, students worked together to create new virtual reality programs. The students were encouraged to use their imagination, to attempt hard things without fear of failure. Take risks. Push the envelope. See what happens.

The class projects didn't always work out. In fact, some were glorious flops.

To celebrate out-of-the-box thinking and daring imagination, Pausch presented "The First Penguin" award to the team who gambled the most in trying new ideas or using technology in new ways even though the project ultimately failed.

Pausch wrote that the students came to understand that the "First Penguin winners were losers who were definitely going somewhere." Even with penguins, one has to be the first to launch into frigid, sometimes predator-filled water. If they all play it safe, none of them get to eat.

This might be fine and dandy in the safety of a classroom or on an Antarctic iceberg with no shareholders demanding accountability. But Pausch also explained that even start-up companies often look more favorably upon a possible chief executive with a failure on his or her record. "The person who failed often knows how to avoid future failures. The person who knows only success can be more oblivious to all the pitfalls."

In ways big and small, employees, companies, and, yes, students, can grow and benefit by valuing The First Penguin. Tough economic times are scary. Playing it safe is more defensible than going out on a limb. But in choppy waters, innovation and creative thinking may be the very life preservers a company needs to stay afloat. Making room for the ideas of a First Penguin may keep a company from going belly up.

***What's important is empowering creative ideas to float to the top even in choppy waters.***

Email me at [chuck@durakis.com](mailto:chuck@durakis.com) to share your thoughts.

Thanks,

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