

The Business School of Life

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Learning by Observing

As a graduate business student I took a wonderful class in which we studied ancient cultures and looked at the lessons they contained for modern managers. It was an amazing experience to look at how their rituals, patterns, values and governance shed light on the challenges faced by contemporary business leaders. I have had the opportunity to repeat that exercise recently, with a bit of a twist.

I adopted a puppy a few months ago and for the first time in 30 years I have a pet in my home. Chloe joined our household at the age of seven months, after being picked up by the Animal Control department as a stray and remaining unclaimed after two weeks. She has transformed my life in a way few other living things or experiences have. I recently shared one of her antics with my coach who asked me what lessons Chloe could teach a Business Coach. What a rich question that turned out to be! So, here you go—business lessons from my mixed breed puppy.

Things are Definitely Not as They Seem

The most obvious lesson Chloe teaches is thinking outside of the box. I have nicknamed her Houdini because it seems that nothing holds her in. We tried using a crate with her and she was so stressed and distressed by the experience that I couldn't continue to listen to her whimper and cry all night and abandoned the idea. Next we bought a pet gate and installed it across the doorway in the hall so she could be in the hall and the laundry room when we were away. After she knocked the gate down, chewed up the assembly so it could not be re-installed and set off the burglar alarm, causing the police to be called, we decided that would not work either. So, we bought a 48" high exercise pen and set it up in the hallway—she could not jump over it so she crawled under it and got out. We reset the fasteners so she could not crawl under and she managed to drag the entire pen out of the hallway, into the foyer where she pushed it over enough to jump up onto a bench and get free. I just know that her thought process is something like, "Box? What box? I don't see no stinkin' box!" (Did I mention that she has an attitude?)

What Else Might it Be?

When Chloe stayed in the fenced yard while we were away for a short time one day, we came home to find that she had reduced a six foot tall climbing hydrangea to this nifty 12 inch stick (root ball attached) that she was carrying in her mouth as she proudly ran back and forth in the yard. I think the lesson in that stunt has to do with being open to new possibilities—to see a stick where others see a shrub!

Paying Attention to What Matters

Chloe also teaches me about staying close to those who feed you. When there's food involved, Chloe can be counted on to sit very patiently with her eyes glued to the person eating, wiggling just a little closer to be sure she can be seen. If she thinks that she is not seen, she will offer an ever-so-gentle nudge with her nose.

It seems that if we all paid attention to our employees and customers the way Chloe attends to people with food, we would know what needs to be done without having to ask a lot of questions or see things deteriorate before we notice a problem.

The Life-Work Balance Question

Chloe has also mastered the art of having fun and not taking herself too seriously, a great lesson for business owners and leaders who get caught up in the urgency of deadlines and the importance of their work. Chloe knows that a balance of unadulterated joy with the devotion of work and a good measure of pampering makes everything work better—better decisions, better performance, and better attitude.

Imagine how wonderful business would be if we all learned from Chloe (and her counterparts) the importance of letting people know that you're glad to see them! And, to ask nicely for what you want. That would make business more fun and more balanced.

Out With the Old

The final lesson from the Chloe School of Business was a bit difficult for me to see, but I think I've finally figured it out. After all attempts to keep her confined while we are away, we decided to allow her to stay in the bedroom where she sleeps, as she had never bothered anything in that room. I thought I had Chloe-proofed the room, closing the closet doors and moving things up out of her reach, but when we returned, she had managed to open the closet sliding door with her nose (telltale nose prints on the glass) and get to my shoes. There was six pair of shoes—chewed, mauled, torn and destroyed—scattered all over the room. The lesson for business? You have to get rid of the old paradigms, model and perspectives to make room for the new ones.

So, courtesy of Chloe (who is now in doggy day care) I'm going shopping and I leave you with this question: ***What old stuff do I need to shed to make room for the new?***

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