

Business Tips from Children

While awaiting the arrival of a colleague at a Barnes & Nobles coffee shop recently I passed the time by reading through a delightful little book by Cynthia Lewis and published by Workman Books called “The Really Important Things My Kids Taught Me”. While reading these little tidbits of life wisdom I realized that many of the things her children taught her about life, my children have taught me – and just as importantly that I bring these lessons with me daily as I go through my work day. These lessons amount to business tips my children taught me, and although I draw them from the Lewis book, I can hear my kids lecturing me as I write this article.

One of the lessons we teach our kids is sharing and so in the spirit of the topic, I thought it could be useful and entertaining if we looked into the child within and explored some of Lewis’ folk wisdom and see what business lessons they bring.

Lesson 1: *Be early if you’re the bird. Be late if you’re the worm.*

This is not as obvious as it seems. All too often the birds show up too late because they are too arrogant and secure in their position as birds, and just the same the worms – anxious to be birds – arrive too early. The business lesson here is to know your market position and behave according to your interests. While you may covet thy neighbor’s position, you cannot gain it without going through the process of growth. Growth occurs when you know when to show up.

Lesson 2: *The fewer promises you make the more of them you’ll keep.*

There is no statement truer than this and no greater reason to make only the few promises you know you’ll keep. Your credibility is your most precious marketing asset. If you can’t keep a promise, don’t make it. If you make a promise, keep it.

Lesson 3: *Don’t save time – use it up.*

Too often we get caught up in speed as if it is the only thing our customers want, or we get equally caught up in saving time. It’s all about efficiency, not speed. Look for ways to do things better, not necessarily faster. If you use up the time you have in a productive way – or use your customer’s time in a useful way – then everyone will view it as time well spent. And more time well spent is way better than less time poorly spent.

Lesson 4: *If you want to see a shooting star you have to spend a lot of nights looking up.*

There is a certain amount of sacrifice that goes into everything worth having and if you have a set of goals you wish to achieve you are going to have to make the sacrifices and investments (in time and money) necessary to get what you want. It will not come easily. If you’re not committed to seeing it through, don’t start.

Lesson 5: *It is not really giving if you give away the animal cookies with the missing heads.*

The broken animal cookies – the ones with no heads where you need to guess exactly what animal it was (and where you don’t have the fun of biting off the head) – are clearly less desired than the whole cookie where the animal is identifiable and the head is

available for eating. Therefore, if someone asks you for a cookie and you give him/her one that you don't want – and neither do they – you have actually not given anything at all. Similarly, in business having a promotion around something of little value, that customers care little about and assign little value to, is like having no promotion at all. Actually it's worse, because like with the headless cookie, you have actually demonstrated a negative trait that will be remembered (and resented) by your customers. If you decide you want to give something away, make certain it has perceived value by your customers, or you are in fact, giving away nothing at all.

Lesson 6: The colder you look, the bigger the cup of hot chocolate you'll get.

Image is important whether it comes to cups of hot chocolate or being perceived by customers the way we wish. Your image needs to match your objectives. You must play the part, but you also must look the part.

Lesson 7: If it hurts, stop doing it.

This might be one our children would respond to with an exasperated “duh”, and yet all too often we continue bad business practices because we are invested in them, or we remain in a bad business relationship because we are too lazy to replace bad employees. If something isn't working it hurts your business, and if it hurts, the best way to cure it is to take the first step – stop it.

Lesson 8: Big fish eat little fish.

In business, as in life, you must swim fast when you're small, eat selectively when you're big and only allow yourself to get eaten if it makes sense.

Lesson 9: Don't dive deeper than you have breath for.

There is no sin in operating within your limits. The sin is in doing less than you can. An almost equal sin is taking on more than you can handle. When you dive into the market make sure you dive only as far as you can without drowning. Like with swimming, the more you practice holding your breath, the longer you can remain under water.

Lesson 10: While you're standing there deciding whether or not to get your net, the butterfly is flying away.

We learn rather quickly that opportunities are recognized and seized or they are lost. The saying that he who hesitates, loses, is born of the same notion as this delightful lesson. The urgency of an opportunity is only matched by its impatience, and the need to act is matched by the risk of loss. Butterflies don't wait around to be caught, and deals worth doing are rarely available for as long as you need them to be. Seize the opportunity or be prepared to lose it.

Lesson 11: If you want to zoom down the expert slope tomorrow, you have to fall down the bunny slope today.

Everything worth having has its price and any achievement you reach today is the culmination of the efforts you put forth to get you there. Your ability to perform tomorrow is based on how well you train, prepare, and sacrifice today.

Lesson 12: *Picking your nose when no one else is looking is still picking your nose.*

Just because you get away with it doesn't mean it isn't something you shouldn't be doing. Enough said.

Lesson 13: *If a tree had apples last year, don't expect pears this year.*

Einstein once wrote that you can only correct the problems you face by thinking differently than you did when you created them. Part of the process of fixing what is wrong is recognizing how it got that way. Another part is having the appropriate expectations. If you are aiming for pears and get apples, try to figure out why and what changes are necessary. If you didn't know what to expect, got apples, and are satisfied...enjoy your apples and be grateful when more apples show up on your tree.

Lesson 14: *Sometimes your best move is blocked by your own checkers.*

All of us have witnessed situations where a person's failure to achieve their goals is a function of their being their own worst enemy. Stay out of your own way and you will find that you have the freedom to move as your goals require.

15. *Every good has a better and every bad has a worse.*

Perhaps a statement of optimism only a child can make, this lesson is the most important for me because it teaches me that no matter how good things are I need to strive to make them better and no matter how bad things may be I need to look toward better times because they are never as bad as it can get. To me this means that things are always getting better, even when the occasional dip in good luck occurs.

This article has made me younger – or at least I feel younger. The ideas expressed by the Lewis book are ultimately full of hope and rich in the possibilities life brings. They are about positioning yourself (and your company) to get all you can out of life by looking and acting how you must, taking risks, and doing the right thing when it comes to others. These lessons are the magic of youth, and one more reason I am so grateful to my own kids.