

Editor's notes:

I think that I have finally found the secret to a happy marriage, and I owe it all to an IKEA commercial. In the commercial, a man comes home from a brutal day at the office and starts to rant and rave to his wife. They are both standing in their brand new IKEA kitchen, yet she hears none of his outrageous venting. Instead of responding to his tirade, the wife is enveloped by the beauty and serenity of her new kitchen. She hears nothing of her husband's excessive ranting; instead, she is exalted by the beautiful words of a cherished husband telling her how much he wants her. The camera pans to the wife's face that is filled with love, joy, and anticipation.

And here, in this 30-second commercial, lies the cheapest marital counselling advice that anyone can pass on to you. That's my take on this commercial, what's yours? Drop me a line if you want to add to my interpretation.

Here are a few more dates to contemplate for the rest of the month:

World Vegetarian Day, October 1 -- The annual kickoff of World Vegetarian Month celebrating vegetarianism's benefits.

Magic Day, October 31 -- The Science of American Magicians proclaims this day in honour of Harry Houdini, the famous magician who died on October 31 in 1926. (It's the culmination of International Magic Week, October 25-31.) Although it was reported that he died while performing in a water torture act, he actually died from a ruptured appendix, believed to have been sustained when a college student punched him in the abdomen to test his well-known ability to withstand blows to the body.

Halloween, October 31 -- Halloween traditions extend back several millennia. In late October, when the days grew shorter, the Celts celebrated the Feast of Samhain, Lord of the Dead. Bonfires were lit to frighten away ghosts, and celebrants sought to protect themselves from harm by disguising themselves in grotesque costumes and masks.

Frustration station

Twenty percent or more of staff members in any organization are frustrated, according to research conducted by the management consultancy Hay Group. Why? Because something prevents them from contributing as much as they can -- including poor job fit, excessive workload, and procedural barriers. And typically, these are your most "engaged" employees. So having employees who are loyal and committed to your organization isn't enough. You must make certain that they're free to be successful in their positions. Otherwise, you'll soon have either disengaged employees or open positions.

If there's a lot being said, say less

Bear down on your people when there's a problem to solve, and take it easy when things are going well -- isn't that the way to communicate what's needed? Maybe for some, but Rhonda Brown, former CEO of Nine West Footwear Corporation, turns this maxim on its head.

"When business is good, that's usually when I'm at my toughest," she says. It's easier to push standards and expectations then. When things are tough, I go more into teaching mode so that people can bubble up problems and solve them, as opposed to being afraid and not telling me about the problems."

It's a case of suiting your message to your people's ability to hear it in the midst of dealing with the demands of the moment. When things are noisy and confused, don't add to the din. Instead, listen for what people need to say.



Here Kitty, Kitty

Legend has it that cats are the "familiars" or helpers of witches. This may reflect the fact that cats are the natural predators of many of the "ingredients" witches supposedly used in their cauldrons for preparing charms and casting spells. These included mice, bats, and, to quote William Shakespeare, "eye of newt and toe of frog." The targets of witch hunts in the Middle Ages and the 17th century were typically older women who were likely to keep cats. The witch hunters would bolster their cases by pointing to the "hard evidence" of the accused witch's familiar.

How Small is Small

Nanotechnology is the science and technology of the very small. Its name comes from the nanometre, a unit of measure equal to one billionth of a metre. Scientists believe that by allowing controlled manipulation of single atoms or molecules, nanotechnology will revolutionize numerous fields, including materials science, computers and electronics, medical care and pharmaceuticals, environmental research and protection, energy production and storage, and virtually all forms of mechanical engineering.

Here are some ways to put the unimaginably small size of a nanometre in perspective:

- A nanometre-sized particle is smaller than a living cell and can only be seen with a powerful microscope.
- A sheet of paper is 100,000 nanometres thick.
- The width of a human hair is between 50,000 and 100,000 nanometres.
- A nanometre is to one inch what one inch is to 400 miles.
- A person who is six feet tall is 1,83 billion nanometres tall.
- The letter "I" printed here is about 2.5 million nanometres tall.

Balloon Beginnings



The earliest balloons were inflated animal bladders, intestines, and stomachs. It wasn't until 1824 that scientist Michael Faraday invented the rubber balloon, filled with hydrogen at the Royal Institution in London. Faraday cut two circles from sheets of rubber and dusted the centres of the circles with flour to keep them from sticking together. Then he pressed the sticky edges together to seal the sides, and inflated the balloon with hydrogen.

According to Balloon Headquarters, an organization for balloon enthusiasts, by 1825 people were making their own balloons using a kit marketed by British rubber manufacturer Thomas Hancock. By 1889, pre-made imported balloons were available in the United States. The Montgomery Ward catalogue sold them for four cents each or 40 cents a dozen. In 1907, The Anderson Rubber Co. began manufacturing balloons in the United States. The modern-day latex balloon was developed in 1931 by Neil Tillotson, a chemical engineer from New England. His first model was shaped like a cat's head, with pointed ears and printed whiskers.

Tillotson founded the Tillotson Rubber Co. Its Dipco division still makes balloons today.

One type of learning to avoid

(Editor's note: This article was prepared several months ago. In light of the recent financial crisis in the United States, this might provide some insight as to why no alarms were raised by people in government who, it now turns out, knew almost a year ago what was happening with Wall St.)

Can we learn to be incompetent?

Absolutely, says Chris Argyris, organizational development expert and professor emeritus of Harvard Business School. He calls the phenomenon "skilled incompetence." Often, we ride a fine line between saying what we want to say and avoiding upsetting those in power.

When we might really think "Oh my, this is going to be a disaster," we say instead, "Well, I'm a little concerned about taking that road, but I'm sure there are other opinions on the matter." This kind of "diplomacy" -- i.e., skilled incompetence -- keeps us out of trouble, yet dilutes the nature of what we really think. It takes some expertise and can take our careers in just the upward direction we desire. But it takes our organizations down a much different path.

As this diplomacy becomes the norm and every potentially uncomfortable situation is avoided, unspoken rules will develop: 1) Provide information, not conflict; 2) Agree with but don't question superiors; and 3) Maintain the course of action -- don't try to stop it or modify it. The result? Policies, procedures, and strategies based on ignorance rather than knowledge.

Skilled incompetence can be "unlearned," Argyris says, and should be if organizations are to meet their goals and retain employees for whom facts, truth, and authenticity matter.

Happy Halloween