

## ***A New Millennium Resolution: Learn to Take Risks.***

Running a business today is all about entrepreneurship and risk-taking in a highly competitive environment. In my travels and conversations with contractor members, I have found that they are fighting hard for their businesses every day and often putting in outrageous hours. Getting good quality employees appears to be the most challenging part of the game today and some feel like their employees are doing the minimum just to get by. They ask how can they encourage their people to start thinking outside of the box and taking risks to improve the company's bottom line.



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Everyone learns their life lessons in different places at different times. Everything I learned about risk-taking, I learned in the Vietnam War while in my mid twenties. I don't recommend participation in a war to learn about risk-taking, but where you are in your formative years is often where you learn things that are destined to shape your life in the future.

You may remember a quirky and often thought-provoking book titled: "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten", by Robert Fulghum (Random House, 196 pages, 1989). Fulghum, a Unitarian minister, tapped into the basic tenets we know already but tend to forget in the course of our increasingly complex lives. In the title essay, Fulghum praises the rules we learned as children in kindergarten: "share everything, play fair, don't hit people, put things back, clean up your own mess, don't take things that aren't yours, say you're sorry, take a nap every afternoon", and much, much more. Remember these things as adults, Fulghum suggests, and your life can be richer, and our world would be a better place.

A painting contractor probably learned how to be a risk taker long before becoming a painting contractor, even perhaps beginning in kindergarten. Because managing a painting contractor business is risk-taking by definition, and not everyone is cut out to be a risk taker.

"Go out on a limb every now and again-that is where the best fruit is".

It is no different when it comes to employees and risk-taking at work. Anytime you come down hard on an employee who made a mistake trying something new, you send the

message to everyone: Take a risk and you will get burned. To learn about how to turn up the heat on risk-taking without burning out the people who work for you, I turned to Jac Fitz-Enz's book, "The 8 Practices of Exceptional Companies" (Amacom, 240 pages, 1997). This is an extraordinary book documenting the most enduring "best practices" in human asset management.

There is no better time than now, at the dawn of the new millennium, to encourage more risk-taking within your company. Try a few of these ideas on risk-taking (from Jac Fitz-Enz's book):

1. How many levels of approval exist within our company? Having layers of approval for a new idea is the corporate equivalent of the guillotine. Seek to simplify the process and the pain to which innovative employees are subjected.
2. Are employees who take risks that don't pan out rewarded for their efforts? It's natural to salute an innovator whose idea was a smashing success. But when you also recognize those whose ideas fell short, you encourage risk-taking behavior. After all, an innovator's next idea is a terrible thing to waste.
3. Are innovations that fail openly discussed? I don't mean that you should beat up on the innovators. I mean initiate a process to learn why their ideas failed. Many failures are just a small "tweaking" away from being a success, but companies often throw out the baby with the bathwater by not conducting a comprehensive autopsy.
4. Is money available to fund new ideas? People buy lottery tickets for the chance to win. Just like in the lottery, your employees will look past your exhortation to take risks to see if your company puts money behind new ideas.
5. Is innovation part of everyone's job description? Managers whose entire job is based on the status quo are often poor judges of innovative ideas. Reduce this problem by giving everyone a risky assignment or two as part of his or her job.

Rather than waiting for an employee to come forward with a new idea, management should empower each employee to be an innovator. Try including in each employee's goals for the New Year a "to be determined" project. Make the employee responsible for implementing a new process or procedure that significantly enhances the way their work is currently performed, or a new way to save materials or reduce costs on the job.

The kindergarten lessons outlined by Fulghum are not always carried forward into our adult lives. I'd like to believe that an afternoon siesta would increase productivity. But I do know that sharing new ideas can improve the workplace.

I believe that innovation is achieved through risk. Empower your employees to join you in innovative risk-taking in the new millennium.