Business works when you see beyond the obvious

By David James Gough

The chances are you went somewhere by car today. It might have been to work, or to get groceries, or simply for pleasure. If that's the case, here's a question for you: What do you remember of your journey?

The answer is most likely very little.

The thing is, you didn't need to remember all the details of the journey. You didn't need to memorize the road signs; you simply read them. You didn't need to worry about the color or make of the car in front; you just needed to make sure you didn't hit it. In short, your brain was in recognition mode.

There's a quote by photographer Dorothea Lange that appeals to me as a photographer: "The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera."

The thing to note is that it takes time, effort and a different way of seeing to take in all that detail. The author Betty Edwards in her book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* illustrates the point well. Her students drew more accurate copies of faces when the photograph they were working from was turned upside down. With the picture the right way up, the students identify a nose and draw what they think is a nose. After all, they've seen enough noses in their lifetime to know what one looks like. How hard could it be?

The problem was they didn't draw *that particular nose* in the photograph in front of them. They recognized but didn't look. When the photographs were turned upside down the drawings became much more accurate because the students had to look closely rather than rely on memory and assumptions.

So what has all this to do with business? It's all down to what is really happening, as opposed to what you think is happening.

If the first you know of a problem is when a system breaks down, it's too late to avoid the fallout. On the other hand, if you take time to look closely you can see things aren't running smoothly and you can take action to prevent them from getting worse.

So how do you identify an issue before it goes off the rails?

It's all down to looking beyond the obvious. It's asking yourself those "What if …" questions. It's speaking to people (and listening to what they say!). And it's especially down to building trust in the people who know the process inside out because that's what you pay them for. Above all, it takes time, just as seeing the detail of that car you followed to work takes much more time than simply recognizing it is a car.

Your staff are part of your team—or should be. Do you treat them as such? Do they want to contribute their ideas? Or have they figured that life's a lot easier if they simply get on with their job and keep quiet?

You need to see reality rather than assume it, and you do need the right balance between recognition and understanding. Both are important if your business is to thrive.

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