

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM SPENDING

THREE YEARS IN CHEAP SEATS AT THE CIRCUS.

My parents would take me to Ringling Brothers Barnum Bailey Circus at Madison Square Garden. They could only afford the cheap seats: up high over the action and in front of Ring 1 or 2.

The first year I watched the circus, I tried to take it all in: Ring 1, 2, and 3 plus a Manhattan audience that was worth watching.

There was too much stimuli for me to deal with. I got a headache.

The second year, I focused attention on the Ring directly in front of me. But since we were in the cheap seats, the Ring in front of me was usually the least interesting act.

I got bored.

In my third year, I became a master of watching a three ring circus from cheap seats: Focus on the Center Ring. Ignore everything else.

What are the lessons learned?

1. Don't focus on everything you observe. You will be ineffective. Effective leadership means being deliberate about what you choose NOT to focus on.
2. What is directly in front of you may not be the most important thing for you. Watch savvy urban pedestrians standing on a corner waiting for the light to turn. Why do they look 90 degrees to their right and not directly in front of them? The greatest threats/opportunities may be oblique to your line of sight. Think of Blackberry's focus on its devices as a core business tool and dismissing the Apple Iphone as a clever tool for young consumers. Dell made the same mistake in failing to appreciate the core Dell business threat posed by Apple Ipad because Apple was oblique to its line of sight.
3. The most important question to ask yourself: Where is the Center Ring Today?

Below is a note I sent to a client of mine, a CEO of a hospital:

"I mentioned a story of my three year learning experience in the cheap seats watching a three ring circus.

"Health Care Delivery is a Twelve Ring Circus plus an unruly audience well worth watching.

"The Circus Story also applies to your job as hospital CEO.

"I see the Center Ring as contract negotiations. Fail in that and it doesn't matter what you do with the other rings.

“The Second Ring is the hospital relationship with primary care physician group practices. They want to feel that you are listening as well as speaking.

“The Third Ring is the political infighting going on at the hospital. It is a sink hole for your time. You can never put in enough time. The more time you spend on the Third Ring the less time you have for the Second Ring. And your failure with the Second Ring is your greatest threat.

“Manage the Third Ring by spending the time to do a satisfactory enough job. God will not give you enough hours in the day or enough years in your life to “solve” the politics at your hospital. Don’t even try.”

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What do YOU think of these ideas?

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