

Learning from the past

Last week, we commemorated the 59th anniversary of "The date that will live in infamy," as FDR called it. December 7, 1941 was the date of the Pearl Harbor bombing.

Next year, 60 years will have passed since that fateful day, when Japanese planes attacked a sleepy naval base that should have known better. Some of the lessons have been well learned, while others are seemingly never learned. All of them can be applied to our lives.

Many people have written in both defense of the commanders at Pearl Harbor, and also to criticize them. Some have suggested that FDR knew of the attack, and purposely let it happen in order to bring the USA into the war. Certainly, Roosevelt knew of the indications that the Japanese would attack a U.S. target. Whether he knew it would be Pearl Harbor, and subsequently let the attack happen, will probably never be known. Certainly, the commanders didn't get the information they should have gotten. Washington left them in a horrible position by not sharing information about a possible attack. Even with this knowledge, we can still gain lessons to help us from the attack on Pearl.

I'm no historian, and especially not a military historian. Be that as it may, let's look at some of the elements of the attack, and the subsequent U.S. victory at Midway, that we can apply to business, and to our daily lives.

Number 1: Expect the unexpected.

Everyone who knew *anything* absolutely knew the first Japanese attack, if it would occur, would take place at the Philippines, or possibly at Wake Island. Pearl Harbor was too far away, too strong, too shallow. No torpedo planes could be effective there because of the shallow water. No enemy planes could ever attack there because it was too far away. Carriers would be spotted before they ever got close to the island. It was unthinkable. Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and General Walter C. Short knew that there was little chance of a first attack on Pearl. They knew it up until the time when it actually took place. In our business lives, and in our personal lives, as well, we must expect the unexpected. It will happen.

Number 2: You rarely know what you think you know.

It turned out that American forces were intercepting the Japanese diplomatic wire, and had broken the Japanese diplomatic code. They were deciphering the material before the Japanese embassy was getting it deciphered. Local commanders didn't have that information, and Washington commanders didn't spend enough effort to effectively alert them, for whatever reason. The local commanders thought they had enough information to act on, but time proved that they were wrong. In business, we never seem to have all the information, even when we constantly keep our eyes out looking for it. If we are part

of a larger organization, we trust our leaders, even though we never understand the dynamics of what makes them do what they do. Sometimes, the one person who has the right information is the person on the floor. Any organization must foster the communication of information to other members of the team, even if that's a family organization.

Number 3: You must capitalize where you can.

Even though the Japanese planes did an immense amount of damage to the Pacific Fleet, including the sinking of some of America's most powerful "battle wagons", they missed on two items: the carriers were not in port, and they missed the main fuel tank. If the Japanese navy had stayed a bit longer, looked for the carriers, and torpedoed the tank, the war would have taken a dramatically different turn. Fortunately for the USA, the Imperial Fleet was satisfied with their conquests, and turned back for home. In business, we must remember that often the one thing we are looking for to make a sale, change a business, or inspire a staff is often something we don't initially find. If we take the extra time to make certain we have maximized our contribution, we can have an inordinate amount of influence. We must learn to stick with a project until it's done, not just to seize our success and run.

Number 4: We must be willing to make bold moves

In the battle of Midway, Admiral Nimitz, who replaced Kimmel as the commander of the Pacific fleet, took a chance. He listened to his code-breakers who suspected that Midway was going to be the next target of the Japanese war machine. As a result, Nimitz took a bold move, positioned his carriers, and repelled the attack, sinking Japanese carriers, and turning the tide of the war. If Nimitz had not moved as he had, and if his commanders had also not moved decisively, the attack might have had a far different end game: Japanese naval leaders were hoping to use the attack to pull the remaining carriers out of their hiding, into a position where they could be ambushed and destroyed. Bold moves make the difference in dramatic situations. Conservative moves never seem to make a lot of difference.

Closer to our own time, Ronald Reagan took a bold move when he demanded that the USSR tear down the Berlin Wall. Aside from Reagan, nobody seriously thought it would ever happen. Many politicians ridiculed him for the speech. Nobody ridicules it now. It was a bold move in a desperate situation.

Number 5: Learn from the mistakes of others

History has punished Kimmel and Short for not being watchful enough; it has been more kind to Douglas MacArthur, even though he was more careless. MacArthur, commanding forces in the Philippines, sat back and let Japanese planes destroy his bombers, which still sat on the ground. Unlike Kimmel or Short, he had the benefit of knowing that hostilities had begun, but never acted on it. MacArthur is usually remembered as a hero of the Second World War, but history might have taken a different turn if his base had been attacked first, or if FDR hadn't protected him from the same fate awarded the Pearl Harbor commanders. Ultimately, the loss of that air power couldn't have stemmed the tide of the more numerous Japanese forces, but it might have held it off for a while more.

He should have taken the initiative, moved the planes, or better yet, used them to attack. He didn't learn from the mistakes that the other commanders had made. In business, we often see problems that have been adequately dealt with by others. Even more than that, we see problems that have stymied other people. Rather than learn from their successes and mistakes, or from our own errors and triumphs, we often repeat the wrong thing.

Number 6: Keep your reconnaissance in motion

If Kimmel and Short had increased their reconnaissance flights, the Pearl Harbor attack could have had a radically different ending. Even though they knew hostilities were about to commence, they didn't take the steps necessary to make a difference. In our lives, we must continually keep our eyes open for trends, competitors, or danger, whether personal or business-oriented. Only by continually keeping our information fresh can we make rational decisions about the change that happens in our lives.

Number 7: Don't put all your eggs in one basket

Pearl Harbor is a harbor in a funnel. The geographic nature of the harbor made an attack particularly dangerous, since the mouth of the harbor restricted the ability of ships to pass in and out, and the concentration made it easier for Japanese planes to hit the moored ships. In our lives, we too often pen ourselves up in well-known situations, which may be comfortable, but do not allow us free movement and growth. We must constantly try and "move out of the box" in our personal and professional lives.

Number 8: Know your challenges

If you've ever seen the movie "Tora, Tora, Tora," you know this one: Short was so worried about sabotage that he concentrated his planes in one place. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. If Short had thought adequately through the ramifications of his action, he might have taken a different course. Sometimes, in our lives, we spend all of our time worrying about bogeymen who will never come, while forgetting the dangers that actually lurk in our lives. We forget what enemies we actually have, even when those enemies are within us.

Number 9: Keep your skills up

It's been said that a military force usually fights according to the way they last won. In Vietnam and Korea, our forces fought using the methods of World War Two. In the Gulf War, we changed. Why did our forces change for the Gulf? It's because of Vietnam. If we had won in Vietnam, we probably wouldn't have changed. Along with most of the armed forces, Kimmel and Short were expecting a repeat of World War One. While they were sleeping, Air Power became supreme, along with mechanized artillery (like tanks). Naval battles were now won with Air Power, projected from carriers, not with sea battles between battleships. Ground wars were won with air and tanks and paratroopers, not with trench warfare.

If you look at the Gulf War, the U.S. was fighting with WWII standards and methods. Saddam's forces were using WWI standards and methods, albeit with the addition of Russian fighters. In business and in our personal lives, we tend to make decisions based on our experiences, even when those experiences are no longer relevant. "The way we've

always done it," is rarely the right way to do it anymore. It might need only a bit of change, but it always needs freshening up, if not total change.

Number 10: Don't let setbacks get to you.

It's hard to see how this could be learned from Pearl, but it's something I found out a few years ago. Earl Nightingale, often known as the "dean of success," was a survivor of the USS Arizona, a battleship that was destroyed in the Pearl bombing. He never let it pull him down, although he almost never talked about it in all his writings. We can't let things pull us down.

In each of our lives, we fight battles that may turn against us, challenges that may be too much of a challenge, and our own doubts, nightmares, and bogeymen that may limit us from making a difference. It's important to make changes so that when the attacks do come, we can see the possibilities, for good and for evil, make the changes that we need to change, and never let the whole thing get us down. Even when we lose a battle, we can use it as a rallying point to help us win the war.

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