Coffee, Confusion and Continuous Improvement

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The book *Born Standing Up*, by Steve Martin, is a close-up look at the career of a performer who seemed to skyrocket to success as a standup comedian and then movie-star. As readers of Martin's book quickly realize, his fast-track to success was only an illusion. Martin began honing his craft at a very young age and his career is a wonderful example of what can happen to a creative person devoted to learning.

Early in *Born Standing Up*, Martin touts a text titled *Showmanship for Magicians* as a wonderful source of inspiration for his early stand-up gigs as a 15-year old performer at local Cub Scouts and Kiwanis Club meetings. Three bits of advice from the two books offer magically timed wisdom for leaders:

1. **It's time for something new** – After denigrating the "current state of magic," the author of *Showmanship*, Dariel Fitzkee, describes magic as "old-fashioned." Martin explains that "Though published in 1943, this statement contains an enduring truth. All entertainment is or is about to become old-fashioned." If I had a lottery ticket for every time I've been asked for a risk management program case study or a sample risk plan, I'd surely be living a comfortable, work-free life on a tiny island in the Pacific. The truth is, when it comes to creating the strongest possible risk management program for your entity, *it's time for something new*. Ask:
    - What are the top three factors influencing our desire to understand and manage the risks we face?
    - What is an approach we have tried that may have worked elsewhere, but doesn't fit the bill here?
    - To whom must we demonstrate our serious commitment to embrace risk-taking along with risk management?
    - Who cares most deeply about whether we succeed or fail in building a risk management program?
2. **Take scrupulous notes** – In *Born Standing Up*, Steve Martin explains how he tried to follow the advice in *Showmanship for Magicians* by keeping "scrupulous records of how each gag played after my local shows." The chapter on his early years as a standup comedian and magician features a wonderful image of his handwritten performing notes, including the reminder to "relax, don't shake." Martin would regularly "write in the margins of my Big Indian tablet; then I would summarize how I could make the show better next time." What timely and wonderful advice for leaders charged with designing, facilitating or coaching others in new risk management strategies! First, relax, don't shake… and then, take notes! Capture what went well, what bombed, and your in-the-moment impressions about "why" and "what next?!"
3. **Celebrate surprises, unanticipated results and even naiveté** – Martin recounts that he was surprised to discover that his audience was often appreciative when his magic tricks didn't work. This led him to think long and hard about a career as a magician—he couldn't imagine ever being able to afford

> the overhead costs associated with certain-to-wow, advanced stage illusions such as “Sawing a Lady in Half.” Describing his naiveté as “one element necessary to all early creativity,” Martin explains that it is “that fabulous quality that keeps you from knowing just how unsuited you are for what you are about to do.” Let’s face it, true experiments in the delivery of new services, or assembly of new teammates for tough assignments rarely, if ever, turn out as we expect. Yet surprising results aren’t necessarily ones we should forget. In so many cases, the lesson that caught us by surprise is the one we should cherish.

If you’ve read *Born Standing Up* or are a devoted fan of Steve Martin, the title will be familiar. *Coffee and Confusion* was the name of the club on Grant Avenue where lucky San Franciscans were able to see 20-year-old, unknown comic Steve Martin perform his “fledging comedy act” and play the banjo. Many of us are guilty of feeling a bit confused in the wee hours before we’ve had our first sip of coffee or faced the first risk conundrum of the day. But by the time we’ve taken a few pages worth of notes about something, or reveled in an unexpected result, that confusion is replaced with a sense of deep satisfaction that we’ve made progress by, once again, learning something new.

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