

There was one specific phrase drilled into a generation of millions of American kids for several decades. No, it's not "just do it"—that's Nike's slogan! Looking back, we're talking about the era when American kids were *not* driven everywhere by their parents. This was a time of long summer nights where kids in many an American neighborhood rode their bikes everywhere, often for hours on end, and with little to no direct supervision. And kids walked for blocks both to and from school, every day. This was not a fear-driven era about lots of kids going missing, except maybe a couple skipping school for the day. Wow, that seems a much more innocent and far less wealthy time. But one of the perceived childhood risks back then was getting run over by a train or a truck when walking or riding bikes. I know this sounds a bit petty in today's context, but it was such a big deal that parents, school principals, and police officers made sure every kid knew the rule: stop, look, listen! That's it! Stop completely, look both ways, listen for train whistles or vehicles' horns honking. Only then can you proceed safely. Yep. *Stop. Look. Listen.*

One theory is that this phrase took root when a train conductor coined it many decades ago. And that makes sense for trains, because conductors would always blow the train's whistle when approaching a road crossing or intersection. Stop. Look. Listen. That training saved many a tragedy from happening!

And for us, *stop, look, listen* is a really key idea for the stewardship of all of our organizations. That's because it's a great exercise in "situational awareness." If you look up *situational awareness* on the web, the technical description is so geeky I'm not going there. How about a much clearer alternative: "*knowing what's going on around us.*" Except I'm going to add a word: knowing what's *really* going on around us!

You see, the problem is, so much of what we "know" simply isn't true! We are fed so many myths, legacies, and wrong opinions, each typically presented as having the greatest weight. Or we absorb many facts that are out of context. Or a radically changing landscape like technology renders what was true just a few months ago irrelevant now. And the information overload nowadays is just astounding. Metaphorically speaking, in response, many who crave stability or just a break from all that blizzard of data and opinions simply want to bury their heads under a pillow. But they are worse off for that response...much worse!

You might want to go listen to one of my earliest podcasts about being a *knowledge worker*. Let me tell you, I speak relentlessly on this necessity to college students—they must first develop a mindset—and then a practice—of being a top knowledge worker to thrive or even survive in the future. I tell them that my students who graduated twenty years ago are thinking they've got it all nailed...but then, wham, along comes a sweeping new technology or an inventor's innovation that changes their company, their job description, maybe even their career. The people who are often most vulnerable are those who think they have built a personal moat to protect themselves and that they are pretty much invulnerable. Watch out!

So, to be a great steward of both your career and your workplace organization, you must develop an ongoing mindset with regard to research itself that is *stop, look, listen*. That's because what you think doesn't even need to be researched is vulnerable. Yes, we are now in the "stop" dimension. *Stop*, take a step back, and go look at the latest developments in your field—and especially even go beyond your field. Let's say you're *not* in retail at a workplace like Nordstrom's or Macy's and you think to yourself, well, at least I don't have to worry about Amazon. But of course you actually *do*, because what Amazon represents is dramatically broader—it represents successful platform-thinking. Platforms focusing on different economic sectors include Google, Microsoft, and Apple—in short, yes, the most valuable companies on the planet over the past several years. And, of course, we know as believers that the reason the Kingdom of God has been so successful, especially over the past century or so, is that a relatively small group of Christians started actually acting like the Kingdom is *the platform with a worldwide mandate that it is*—and now the market result of the Kingdom's increase is a robust hundreds of millions of people!

So, *stop right now for just a bit* with your grand plans, your workplace's strategic plan, your career goals. In this era when every day seems to bring big change, we must stop and re-challenge our direction.

Then what's next? The second step: it's to *look* intentionally, actually to *look with wisdom*, to discern actual reality. You'll find that some enterprises are succeeding...and some enterprises are failing...and too many naïve people think their enterprise is succeeding when it's actually failing. Tell me, say, in the year 2005, if we were to look for a glimpse into the future of success in the auto industry, would the more enlightening place be Detroit or Silicon Valley? Of course, we *now* know the answer was Elon Musk and Tesla in Silicon Valley. But is that where the vast majority of people were looking for the roots of future success in 2005? Of course not, but now the successful industry migration to electric is being led by Tesla!

But *looking astutely* doesn't always have to entail finding that radical of a change. Sam Walton of Walmart simply cared more deeply than countless other small-business owners across America about delivering low-cost household goods to Americans. Yet, as he succeeded, many of those store owners in towns across America complained bitterly about Sam "destroying Main Street" when WalMart hit town—which of course simply meant hurting local merchants. But the reality was this: the local neighbors of these store owners voted with their pocketbooks, sending the unmistakable signal that Sam was a better steward of their money than local store-owners were. Sadly, those store owners just didn't want to *look*—they simply didn't want to *look* both at Sam Walton and at themselves—and they didn't have the ambition, the desire to be a better steward than Sam Walton for their local neighbors who they bowled with every Saturday.

So, then, effective *looking* is actually an affair of the heart. If you don't truly desire to be a better steward for your workplace owners and your customers as compared to your current or up-and-coming competitors, then you simply won't be *looking* to become better at providing the best goods and services in your marketplace. Are you relentlessly curious, always looking to be the best steward for everyone God connects you with? If that's you, then your current standing for future success is a strong foundation!

Then it's about *listen*. And it's last for a reason here—that's because you should listen only after what you're researching has passed the "look test!" Time and again, I have found that carefully listening to people but then casually relying on what's been said without testing it is a risky approach. That's true for several reasons. First, people talking often tend to exaggerate the scope, the depth, and the success of their endeavors. Second, sad to say, executives and managers often don't really know what's going on regarding the customer-facing details of their enterprise. So, when you talk to them, their information is often unreliable. The funny thing is, customer-facing personnel often take the flawed customer-facing processes that are designed by top management and create workarounds that they simply don't tell management about. That's why *you go look*, then *you go listen* to the customer-facing person about why they're doing it that way. And, no surprise, sometimes their workarounds are working and sometimes they're not! Yes, *look* then *listen* where the task is actually being done. That requires digging and acumen!

When it's working best for an enterprise, you don't really have to interview leadership to discern customer-facing success. Do you need to talk to leaders at Chick-fil-A to see if they're having success?...No workarounds are happening there—Chick-fil-A's service levels everywhere are virtually the same consistency! Great service and the accompanying mantra rings out at every location: "*my pleasure!*"

But there's another group of folks who are crucial to the practice of *stop, look, listen*—the target market! Here's an example where a grand plan may not be always be working: when you listen to folks in your community, have they heard about Jesus from local Christians? Or have they heard condemnation? You see, good listening isn't just about hearing from employees, it's also about listening to the target market.

Here's the deal. This is about situational awareness that's key to success—knowing what's *really* going on around us. That helps us be the best stewards we can be. So *stop!* Then *look* for worthy targets to learn from, and *go listen* to the people who really can help get you to the next level. So. *Stop, look, listen!* If you don't do so, your emerging competitor, the innovator, the entrepreneur—like Tesla, Walmart, or Chick-fil-A—just may be the train you didn't see coming. Do you hear that whistle blowin'? *Stop. Look. Listen.*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Has your workplace enterprise been hit by a rude surprise in the past decade or so by a new innovation or competitor? How has it worked out? What is your thinking about any *stop, look, listen* issues or dimensions that your workplace might be facing? Be specific.
2. The American church at large has lost adherents to the faith, at least in proportion to the population. What might church leaders have missed that might have been prevented with attention to *stop, look, listen*? Accordingly, what future adjustments should be made in your local church?
3. How about you? Are you at the knowledge worker level you need to be to thrive as a competent example of Christ in the workplace? Give an important example of a personal competency area that you have been or should be addressing in a *stop, look, listen* fashion.