Random Thoughts on Minding the Baby and Managing the Business …..

In June, I became a grandfather for the first time. My summer reading list included baby books to polish and relearn essential skills. My son and daughter-in-law suggested "The Baby Book" by William Sears, M.D. and Martha Sears, RN. The Sears' begin their book with a clear statement, "We advise a high-touch style of parenting to balance the high-tech life of the new millennium". So from the first page I began to see parallels between giving birth and raising a child with starting and nurturing a business. Reflecting on current trends in business, it is easy to make the argument that we also need a high-touch style of management to balance the high tech business world.

It might be a stretch to suggest that good parents make good business managers. But as I read the Sears book I certainly saw some broader lessons that applied to life and to business. I can summarize the strong suggestions in this book for sound parenting and relate them to good practices for our own business:

1) Know your baby - A central point the Sears's make is to know your baby and respond to each baby's unique cues. In a similar fashion we need to listen carefully to the cues from our own businesses especially employees and customers. Then we must know them as completely as possible and ensure we respond appropriately to all legitimate needs.

2) Spoiling - The Sears points out, "Spoiling is what happens when you leave something (or some person) alone on the shelf –it spoils". The Sears' advocate frequent touching. Do we leave our customers alone on the shelf or do we touch them frequently? Do we use all the means at our disposal to "reach out and touch" our customers, sometimes in person, sometimes electronically, via surveys, etc.

3) Capabilities Cup - "Each baby enters the world with his or her own potentials, like a capabilities cup. Some babies have larger cups than others. How close a baby comes to fulfilling his or her potential depends to a large extent on the nurturing and responsiveness of the caregivers. You can influence how full your baby's capability cup becomes". So to, each company has its own potential and we need to take time to evaluate whether we are doing everything possible to fill the capabilities cup in our own business. Certainly a sound business plan and a documented strategic plan are essential in assessing capabilities.

4) Attachment Parenting - The Sears' paint a vision of an ideal parenting style they call "Attachment Parenting". This style encourages parents to spend as much time as possible with the baby as this helps the baby thrive. I thought about this in terms of staff development. We use the term "on-boarding" when we hire and orient new employees but we generally do a poor job on this critical task. Statistics show that most business leaders are like negligent parents with latch key children. Perhaps, we should be attached to these hires, especially in the early development stage, to help them thrive.

5) Managing up - Babies actively shape their parents' response and quickly learn how to manage their parents. When they smile, we smile, when they cry, we pick them up. In this way interdependencies, and families, are formed. Rosanne Badowski, co-author of "Managing Up: How to Forge an Effective Relationship With Those Above You" wrote, "Doing what you can to make your manager's job easier will not only help them do their job, but you will be considered a valuable asset to your manager and to your organization. You want to be described as indispensable." Babies do this upward management naturally, but how do we teach this essential survival skill to our employees in the business environment? This is especially critical for younger, less seasoned, employees who may not buy in to overall objectives.

Learning to become a good parent involves a great deal of on the job training. Like raising a baby successfully, each of us needs to adapt, trust our instincts and find our own approach to successfully running a business. Using a high touch style of management is an excellent way to approach that process.

Steve McCarthy, July 2010