



Meat the Future

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"Not Missing Opportunities"

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In the first part of 2021, I read a newsletter from Dr. Tim Elmore entitled "Why Leaders Miss Opportunity and How to Fix That," and it stuck with me. Dr. Elmore is the president of Growing Leaders, which is a nonprofit organization that provides resources that help develop young leaders for school, universities, etc. across the globe. His recent newsletter article sparked my interest as I often times find myself fighting complacency and comfort in my position within Extension, be it my own complacency and comfort or that of folks I find myself working with.

To start the article, Dr. Elmore shares a story about an Ohio State University senior, Tony Piloseno, who like many college students found himself in a part-time job. However, unlike many college students, he actually enjoyed his job with a local Sherwin-Williams store mixing paint. He enjoyed his job so much that he decided to create a TikTok account to share all of his favorite paint color concoctions with his followers.

After his @tonesterpaints TikTok account exploded with popularity (1.5 million followers and 26 million likes, to be exact), Tony began to think that he was on to something. He felt that this account would be a great way to reach a younger audience that the chain had not been previously reaching out to, and decided to share this idea with his employers as a way to increase their presence on social media. He spent months attempting to 'sell' his employers on the idea, but did not seem to get much for positive response. Instead, Sherwin-Williams ended up firing Tony.

He later told BuzzFeed News that after the corporate office visited his TikTok account and accused him of stealing the paint used in the videos, they terminated his employment. "They made me answer a bunch of questions like when I was doing this, where, if there was anyone in the store while I was filming. There was never anyone with me while I was doing it," said Tony.

Why This Paint Store Missed Out on an Opportunity

Dr. Elmore says, "This story is a sort of case study on old-school versus new-wave thinking. Here are three common reasons why we stumble into mistakes like the one Sherwin-Williams made."

1. When we're uncomfortable, we default to: "That's not the way we did it before." "While TikTok is among the newest social media platforms users are leveraging to market and tell their stories, Sherwin Williams has no official account. Tony was on TikTok and saw what the corporation failed to see," says Elmore. "Instead of embracing his viral approach, Sherwin-Williams dismissed him. Why? Despite the smoke screens the paint store hid behind, it is clear to me the company just couldn't see beyond its own familiar methods. The current models were safe and monetized, and that's what preoccupied the company's mind."

2. When we're scared, we become more concerned with protocol than progress. Elmore goes on to share, "In the midst of a pandemic, it's easy to shift into survival mode. Many organizations have relied on employee handbooks and by-laws to determine how to lead in this period of disruption. When leaders do this, they can unwittingly become consumed with protocol. They miss opportunities to adapt and turn interruptions into introductions to new paths for progress. This is no doubt what happened to Sherwin-Williams. Tony is now building his own brand."

3. When we're seasoned, we assume young professionals are immature and don't know much. "When experienced leaders see a 21-year-old student, they can instantly assume his or her ideas stem from naivete. We think they don't know what they're talking about," said Elmore. "Sadly, reverse mentoring is one of the best gifts a seasoned veteran can receive, allowing a young person who recognizes the new world of communication and influence to pass his or her intuition along. This mutual value is exchanged if the leader is humble and hungry."

Elmore went on to say that he felt Sherwin-Williams missed an opportunity upon firing Tony. The company could have decided to promote his ingenuity and leveraged another 1.5 million potential customers.

In 2022, we must do better about not missing opportunities. We must be better about letting comfort and complacency slide, and allowing for new ideas to emerge.

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