SERIES 9 EPISODE 2

UNINTENDED OPPORTUNITIES

When Abraham Lincoln received a letter from Grace, an 11 year-old girl who suggested he grow a beard because he could get more votes that way, the consequences were perhaps more far reaching than could ever have been imagined when that letter was sent. First of all, astonishingly, Lincoln listened and grew the beard…to hear more about that story, tune in to the first Pearl of this series, Lincoln's Beard. Second of all, not everyone was happy about it. In fact, one man faced financial ruin because of it. The disgruntled man was Milton Bradley.

Bradley was born in 1836 and grew up to be the owner of a small printing business which he started in 1860. This business specialised in lithography, a method of printing that used set print to make copies of an original image. He was initially very successful. His success was partly down to his decision to make some prints of the then, mostly unknown, Republican Presidential candidate, a man named Abraham Lincoln. Bradley was an early adopter of new ideas and moved on the right thing at the right time. As Lincoln's reputation and popularity grew, Bradley wanted to capitalise on it, and he did, selling even more of the prints. He was leading the way with these portraits, business was booming and his own popularity was seeing an uplift. Until, that is, he received a customer complaint. "This lithographical likeness is not an accurate likeness of Lincoln", the irritated customer claimed. But how could this be?

When Bradley investigated, the answer was clear, a little girls' letter to the Presidential Candidate had ruined his business.

On the back of Grace's letter encouraging Lincoln to grow a beard to get more votes, Lincoln HAD grown a beard. The lithographical prints of a clean-shaven Lincoln were now out of date… and next to useless. A beard and a little girl had brought his business to its knees. His customers disappeared and a dejected Bradley burned all of his remaining stock.

Bradley was less than impressed and in despair about how things had turned out. Turning to his friend George Tapley for comfort, he decided to find some escapism in playing some games for the evening, not wanting to dwell on the downfall of his business.

The game they chose to play was an imported game, as they played it, Bradley had an idea about how he could adapt it for an American audience. The game they invented that very night was based on good and bad spaces, the spinning of a dial to dictate your steps, the possibility of honour, success and happiness to get you points OR the risk of poverty, disgrace or prison which brings you nothing. The moral message of their game was strong: being determined and persevering through the setbacks brings you success and honesty will lead to happiness, but a lack of restraint will lead to poverty.

In the winter of 1860, before Lincoln had even become President, Bradley released his new game. It proved an instant success and all his first run of stock sold out in a two day visit to New York. By 1861, he had sold 45,000 copies. Bradley went from devastation to reinvention.

You may have heard of the game that saved Milton Bradley. It was called 'The Checkered Game of Life' and later became just 'The Game of Life'. It has been updated countless times for different generations, has sold 70 million copies worldwide and is the number 2 board game in the world behind Monopoly.

You will also have heard of the company that Milton Bradley set up in 1860 for the release of his first game: it was called the Milton Bradley Company, or MB Games as we know it. From 1860 throughout the 20th century this company, the one he founded from ruin, dominated the production of American games. Merging with Hasbro in 1984 they created games including Operation, Buckaroo, Battleships, Hungry Hippos and Connect Four along with thousands of others. The Milton Bradley company was run by his family for 124 years. Milton Bradley's legacy lives on after all.

A beard may have ruined him…but a board saved him.

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APPLICATION

No doubt most of us will have memories of playing some of those games or buying them for other people without ever knowing the context from which the whole thing came. Perhaps next time we see, play or buy one of them we can be reminded of the following leadership lessons:

1. **When we get lemons, we can choose to make lemonade** – a phrase that is doing the rounds now but actually originates from 1915. What happened to Bradley could have made him bitter, he nearly lost everything, but he didn't become bitter, he became BETTER. He reinvented, he thought differently again.

   When we reinvent ourselves, our roles, our schools or our businesses there is no guarantee that it will work, every decision is a risk when you cannot guarantee the outcome. We have all had bad experiences when we had more lemons that we wanted or needed, but we choose what we do with them; turn them into lemonade or suck on them with a sour expression on our faces. We cannot choose our circumstances and sometimes we cannot see them coming, just like Milton Bradley had no idea that an 11 year-old would ruin his business… but we can always choose our reaction. Move from bitter to making it better.

2. **Embrace the speed of change** – Bradley burnt his Lincoln stock in the Autumn of 1860. By the winter of 1860, he had invented a new game, set up a new business and was going again. As Lincoln was growing his new beard, Bradley was growing his new business.

   During 1861 he had sold 45,000 copies and his life, and business, had taken on a new direction. He had been an early adopter with the lithography idea and now he was doing the same with this. Like the Game of Life game he invented, sometimes you win and sometimes you don't… but you have to keep moving. Sometimes speed can be knee jerk and reckless but sometimes speed can be the thing that saves you. Sometimes we don't know the difference because we can't always know the difference ahead of time. Sometimes it does feel like spinning the dial and hoping that we land on a good square but making no moves, gets you no points. We have to keep moving, re-thinking, re-framing, re-inventing and re-establishing what we are trying to create.

3. **It often isn't personal.** Sometimes we can look at the circumstances that have caused our failure, and take it personally. In some circumstances it may be personal, perhaps people are deliberately out to 'get us' or to steal our work or bring ruin to our door or are deliberately trying to undermine us. If that is the case, then it's clearly a different conversation, where one can be had.

   But often it isn't that at all, it's just people making decisions that have unintended consequences for us that they haven't seen or thought about because they didn't even think to consider it, or us. Sometimes it is impossible for them to think of us.

   Grace Bedell wrote her letter not thinking it would result in Milton Bradley's business collapsing, how could she? Abraham Lincoln probably didn't think of all the pictures people were selling when he stood in front of the mirror to see his beard growing.

If we can give the best possible interpretation of events, if we can try and be gracious interpreters of the situation, if we can think it is a cock up not a conspiracy, it will help Us. We will be less stressed, less angry, less paranoid and have a better chance of creating unintended opportunities instead.

QUESTIONS

Lemons make really good lemonade but how do we get to the point where we can make it?

1) **Firstly, grab a piece of paper and name the lemons.** Write down the personal ones first and then the ones in your leadership next. What are those bitter tasting things you are facing and reacting to? Denying how we feel about things never helps, so be honest about how you feel right now about these lemons.
2) **What attitude are you going to adopt in this time of challenge?** Are you going to be bitter or get better? Are you going to be a worrier and retreat or a warrior and come back in strength?
3) **What are the unintended consequences and where are the unintended opportunities?** There will be both. How can you make lemonade? Where are the re-invention opportunities that you may never have even considered before? How could you pivot in this situation? Then choose your speed level. Not everything can wait, some things can – work out the difference.

At the end of his life, having created an award winning, multi-million dollar business across the world, perhaps Milton Bradley looked back on 1860 with gratitude for the little girl and the President's beard, from whom wonderful unintended opportunities came.