



Aiming at the Right Target

-Mark Haeussler, CEO

Sometimes, we are aiming at the wrong target. Cardiovascular disease is a significant cause of death, illness, and disability, and high cholesterol was found to correlate as a significant risk factor to it. Niacin, a key vitamin that we typically get enough of in a healthy diet, correlated with lower cholesterol. So, it seemed, people could benefit from it if they had high cholesterol. Niacin is inexpensive, so many thought it was a great idea to push for more niacin.



Sounds logical. However, treatment with high doses of niacin was not found to improve heart health. **There was a blind spot that was in plain sight.** Focusing on niacin implied that it was an actionable place to make a difference in people's health, but heart health is more associated with *overall* health, rather than cholesterol. Risk factors, such as smoking, an unhealthy diet, being sedentary, and so on, usually *correlate* with overall health. Eating sensibly, exercising, and having healthy relationships are more important.

Leading a complex organization is no different. Leadership is complex and nuanced, as it involves humans, who are complex and nuanced (and even contradictory). As leaders, we must attend to:

- Association or correlation does not equal causation; put another way, coincidence does not mean cause and effect. If income falls and expenses increase, we do not necessarily conclude that higher expenses or the latest marketing campaign alone contributed to lower income.
- Watch for correlations you *want* to believe. Vitamins alone do not confer health. Just going to one seminar does not make you a better leader. Seek input from a variety of backgrounds, expertise, or even interview a naysayer to delve into what they see.
- Ask yourself whether you have a solution in search of a problem or opportunity, rather than a problem or opportunity in search of a solution.
- If a solution seems easy and there is a rush to take it, spend more time in reflection conversations to see if deeper understanding is needed (challenging, for sure, in the high pace of business). From the strategic leader's perspective, solutions come with some complexity.
- Watch for when you or your organization takes a *long* time to make a decision or to move a decision into implementation. Not making a decision, or delaying a decision, can be a blind spot.
- Welcome learning and reframe mistakes. You can *take the word mistake out of your vocabulary*, as it connotes being *wrong or bad* (that we either are right or wrong). It entangles outcome and intent. Saying that Mark was wrong implies Mark meant to be wrong and blamed. Instead, explore what to do different. Keep the view looking forward!