



turning managers into leaders

Merge's Monthly Mega Minute – September 2011

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Merge Gupta-Sunderji turns managers into leaders. Through engaging keynotes and facilitated workshops, she gives people specific and practical tools to achieve leadership and communication success. Contact her at www.mergespeaks.com or 403-605-4756

Old habits die hard!

Last month, while at speaking engagements in Australia, I rented a vehicle. Not so unusual, given that I drive rental cars in almost every city I visit in Canada, the United States and Mexico. But there was one big difference here – I was in Australia – where they drive on the left-hand side of the road! Given my North American inclination to drive on the right-hand side, things were a little bit awkward and uncomfortable to start. For the first half-hour in the driver's seat, every time I intended to signal turning left or right, invariably I would switch on the windshield wipers. Sheer force of habit made me flick the lever on the left instead of on the right – and of course in cars “down-under”, the controls are reversed. I consoled myself with the thought that at least all the Aussie drivers could tell that I was a foreigner and would give me a wide berth! After about thirty minutes of driving, I finally got comfortable with the differences and began to enjoy the journey. For much of my time, I traveled on divided highways, so the trip was pleasant and easy. But then, towards the end of my first day, I drove into Melbourne, Australia's second-most populous city. Traffic volume increased substantially, and with it, so did my level of apprehension. And as my anxiety grew, I found myself once again repeatedly turning on the windshield wipers when I really intended to signal a lane change. When things got rough, I forgot what my logical brain knew to be true and fell back to old habits. And in this case, my old habits could only lead me into trouble!

When I work with leaders, I normally encourage them to trust their instincts and follow their intuition. “When in doubt, fall back to your first instinct and gut feeling,” I tell them. “You know what to do, you have the experience and the knowledge to make decisions and take action. Don't second-guess yourself.” But my recent driving experience in Australia gave me a reason to pause and re-evaluate this counsel. It turns out that this advice only makes sense when you are in familiar surroundings where you can trust your past experiences. When you

**Telephone > (403) 605.4756 Fax > (403) 451.9759 Email > info@mergespeaks.com
www.mergespeaks.com**



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are in a new environment – such as a new organization or a new department (or in my case, a new country) – it may actually be more appropriate to fight your old habits and force yourself to evaluate each new situation based on its merit. If you're moving into unfamiliar territory – new job, new leadership team, or even new aspects of business – then it's a perspective worth keeping in mind!