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*Middle Market Methods™*  
*Value Creating Solutions in Private Equity*

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## **Like, Think About Trying—ASAP. Okay?**

*By John A. Lanier*

### **Introduction**

One of my favorite talk radio personalities (now deceased) indulged audience “gnat-bites.” You would have to be southern to appreciate this. First, what is a gnat? Actually there are two kinds. There is a relatively innocuous bug that swarms your face during summer picnics. Then, there is the evil sand gnat, a/k/a no-see-ums, common to the marshes of the Georgia coast. These nasty buggers are not visible to the naked eye and raise whelps. Hence, a “gnat-bite” is a colloquialism akin to a pet peeve. This installment captures four personal-favorite gnat-bites reflected in the article title.

### **Like**

American pop culture is entertaining. I am still digesting Lady Gaga’s sirloin ensemble. She makes Cindy Lauper’s 80s “Technicolored” hair seem bourgeois. However, Lady Gaga understands branding as well as anyone on Madison Avenue. (No offense.) One of the hazards of American pop culture is butchering the English language with excessive slang, vulgarity, and dangling participles. I still harbor nightmares about my high school English teacher, Mrs. Bird, who would fail students for a single comma splice. We got the message. Actually, she was one of the most profound influences on my teenage years. I dare say she is gazing in amazement from her celestial perch (God rest her soul) that I am writing something coherent to a regular audience. However, she no doubt brandishes a gratified grin that one of our kids bears her name—and has a master’s degree in journalism.

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*“Like” is a slang  
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Mrs. Bird no doubt bristles (I cannot bear to reflect on her in past tense) over the residual “valley speak” immortalized by Moon Unit Zappa (Frank’s daughter). The slang interjection, “like,” makes otherwise educated people appear “like” unrefined. As a responsible parent, I fined our daughters for each infraction. The good news is that we averted a bad habit. This was their introduction to agency theory. Upon growing tired of being broke, they “like” eschewed the slang interjection convention. Sigmund Freud would be proud. Consequently, I am satisfied that they had a job market edge in a demographic with aggravated unemployment. Parents, take heed. This may be the single best advice you can give your graduated or graduating kids who are interviewing for jobs. The hiring managers, as well as their interviewing teams, may have been taught by their own Mrs. Birds. Let’s reflect upon this as karma.

### Think About It

More nonsense. When a person asks someone to think about it, they probably really mean that such is an invitation to agree with them. The communicator may be overlooking that the recipient of the invitation to change positions is completely content with their existing paradigm. Besides, they are busy with their day job. Essentially, they already thought about “it” before the invitation. And the answer is “No, thanks.”

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*“Think about it” is a wimpy surrogate for persuasive argument.*

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Avoid the frustration of the other party “not getting it” and exercise good communication skills. Thinking about something is not bad, per se. Indeed, monumental, weighty decisions should be explored for alternatives and unintended consequences. However, such “thinking about it” should be positioned toward an action—with a deadline.

Consider an alternative. Elizabeth needs to make an either/or vendor decision resulting in a multi-year commitment with performance clauses. A better way to “think about it” might go something like (oops, but this is a grammatically correct deployment of simile) this:

- frame the issue,
- present an evaluation technique, e.g., a criteria based matrix,
- challenge the team to evaluate options against the matrix (this is tantamount to pros and cons),
- impose a deadline for the exercise, and then
- reconvene to decide.

Timid leaders are the ones with exacerbated heart disease traceable to stress. Live longer. Be clear and have a plan. Challenge your team to think toward making a decision within a deadline and move on.

## Trying

Ugh! This is empowerment to fail. I'm with Yoda on this one: "Do or do not do; there is no try." As Larry Munson, the ultimate (now deceased) Georgia Bulldogs announcer would say, "Get the picture." We are not against trying. However, we are in favor of structured trying.

Let's use innovation by example. Innovation is essential to corporate survival. There are two generic types: process and product. Moreover, there are two genres: incremental (sustaining) and disruptive (break-through). Both entail failures. Thomas Edison failed literally thousands of times en route to success. However, Edison had a rigor. He also was an intrepid note taker. Serial innovators are not linear thinkers.

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*"Try" is a thinly veiled  
excuse for "fail."*

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They are double-loop learners and double back to reevaluate past discoveries as possibilities for present and future solutions. The point is that it is a process.

The root cause of the failure of structured trying is the corporate culture. In order to innovate, the business has to take calculated risks and indulge tolerable failures in the innovative odyssey. Companies who do not embrace this axiom do not last long. Getting back to Yoda, we may fail while doing. However, we should learn something that is directionally aligned with the ultimate objective.

## ASAP

This should be a capital offense. "As soon as possible," a/k/a ASAP, is a waste of breath. Most anything is possible. But from whose perspective—the sender or recipient of the message? An ASAP message actually contains some essential ingredients of a directive: the task and the responsible party. However, the message is devoid of two

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*"ASAP" and "never" may  
have more in common  
than is readily apparent.*

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essential elements: a deadline and the resources required to accomplish the task. The resource piece may entail some dangerous assumptions. The communicator may assume that the recipient has the resources to respond quickly—PDQ in military terms. However, one of the most precious resources is time. The fuzzy part is how this newly arrived urgency fits within the cramped priorities of the recipient. Some companies dodge disaster on this one through institutionalized tradition. Veteran employees tend to understand the boss's ASAP bark. But, what about the new hire?

World class organizational cultures hedge their bets on “ASAP” risk with these best practices:

- expunging “ASAP” from their vernacular,
- talking in specifics with timelines,
- enabling pushback for unreasonable requests (it beats voluntary separation for distressed veterans), and
- creating project plans for complex deliverables, e.g., acquisition integration.

The cure is not difficult. The benefit is clear.

### Conclusion

Our tongue-in-cheek journey includes serious messages. We are not born world class communicators. For example, MLK and “The Gipper” (President Reagan) honed their skills over years of practice. Both are examples of the value of good communications skills. My observation is that communication is one of the first casualties of compressed schedules. This is a mistake. Nature abhors a vacuum, and may suck destructive hubris in its vortex. Leaders never fully rebound from this unfortunate oversight. Sometimes, careers are destroyed. The take-aways are twofold and simple. First, make time to communicate. Second, communicate effectively.

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