



The Real World

Fix the Toaster

Do you want to fix the toaster or keep scraping the burnt part off the toast? It seems like a simple question, but hear me out.

If we believe the premise that we get what we accept, the notion that we would continue to accept an unacceptable outcome rather than addressing the core problem is almost laughable. Now, let's take that experience into our corporate hallways.

Cost containment has become the mantra over the last several years for almost everyone. People have been accepting the thought, sometimes reluctantly, that they need to do what it takes to survive the downturn. So far, so good.

But have you asked yourself where examples of non-productive behavior have started to creep in as people battle the problems caused by the way you're doing business now? How are past decisions to defer preventive maintenance starting to show their impact? Where are people in your organization falling further and further behind serving customers, making shipments, or completing their work because staff was reduced without corresponding process improvements being put in place to compensate?

Here is another simple question. Where are you asking people to roll bowling balls uphill every day just to get things done? Are other leaders in your organization even noticing this has become commonplace? Are they stopping to wonder why their people are burning out and don't seem as committed as they once were?

These questions may seem ridiculous and obvious at first blush. But many people get so caught up in the day-to-day that they don't look at the impact their decisions are having on those who are simply trying to make a living and feed their families.

I compare it to driving a speedboat across a lake. Someone can be so focused on quickly getting to the other side that they don't notice their wake is flooding all the properties along the shoreline.

If your organization put process improvement initiatives on hold during the downturn, it's time to take a fresh look at opportunities. While looking for areas to explore, here is a suggestion. Take a look at how your senior executives are running the business.

How seamlessly does your organization really operate? I am prompting you to go much deeper in your thinking process than whether or not you have an up-to-date org chart. You and your top team need to examine whether or not your organization is really coalescing around the best ways to get things done.

Looking at how things are actually getting done in a department or division versus how they are supposed to be done can be quite enlightening. While some people may smile and say, "Great job innovating, team. This is an example of employee engagement at its best," others will be shocked to learn that many of the checks and balances they thought were in place are being ignored for the sake of expediency.

Where do you expect your firm to be on that continuum of discovery when you take the time to examine it? Are your teams operating like a well-oiled kanban system or more like TV's F Troop?

If the answer is not what you had hoped for, take a look at how easy it is for someone at any level to get things done. Examine your processes for efficiency and effectiveness both vertically (relationships with people above or below in the hierarchy) and horizontally (across functional disciplines).

Are you going to fix the toaster, or do you want your people to keep scraping off the toast?

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