

Article 33 – Swamps that I need to drain

Sometimes it's referred to as fire fighting; others will tell you that they are too busy avoiding the alligators to drain the swamp. But whichever figure of speech or analogy you use, the meaning is the same. You keep treating the symptoms and fail to address the cause.

It happens with issues both large and small.

I have an "L" shaped desk in my office and the PC sits where the two sides meet. The other day I was copying some figures from a report and decided that the best place for the report was to the left of the computer. The only problem was that because of the printer, there was insufficient room to open the spiral bound report through 180 degrees so it was propped up against the printer with the angle between the right and left hand page being close to 90 degrees. The result was that the left-hand page kept falling over and obscuring the tables that I was copying from. Despite my best efforts it continued to do this until I placed a bulldog clip over all the vertical pages of the report. Problem solved.

Coincidentally, I had received an e-mail from a colleague in the UK who was bemoaning the fact that "companies seem to be perpetually in a flat-spin and using all their energies killing alligators. There is little left for swamp-draining". And here I was killing an alligator, albeit only a very small one, before deciding that the better solution was to drain the swamp.

We tend to associate swamp draining with the big strategic issues and the belief that this is the preserve of senior management. Yet all too often we fall into the trap of increasing our implementation activities rather than questioning the goals that these activities are designed to achieve. As the Duke of Wellington is reputed to have said, "having lost sight of our objectives, we redoubled our efforts".

So if sales are down the answer is to increase the call rate.

If product quality is variable, increase the inspection rate.

If the order fulfilment time is blowing out, change the transport company and increase the stock.

But there's an opportunity coming up that you should take advantage of.

Most businesses display some degree of seasonality and for many the pre-Christmas period is one of frantic activity followed by a welcome lull in January.

So how about using January to identify the swamps that need draining in your company?

Start with the assumptions behind the Strategic Business Plan.

Are they still valid? Because if they are not, no amount of implementation effort will succeed in realising the Plan's objectives. So update the plan. Think through the implications of drought, a new competitor or new technology and adapt the Plan accordingly.

But if the assumptions are current, any problems must lie in aspects of its implementation.

The symptoms of poor implementation take many forms but the **cause** is invariably a lack of organisational alignment.

Do all your employees –

- π Understand where the organisation is now?
- π Understand the destination and the journey?
- π Understand their role in getting there?

How do you find out? Ask them. Undertake an Employee Feedback Survey. Our surveys consistently show that the two most common areas of negative feedback are Communication and Participation in Decision-making.

When you are in the swamp up to your neck in alligators, explaining to everyone how you got there and asking them for their ideas for getting you out are not the first things that spring to mind.

In addition to feedback from your employees, what about feedback from your customers?

Is your understanding of their needs still current?

Is the new IT system really working from the customers' perspective?

Do you do anything that is different and better than your competitors – from your customers' viewpoint?

Do you have a competitive advantage – and how sustainable is it?

When it comes to customer satisfaction, the people who most influence this are **not** the senior management team. How your customers feel about their business relationship with you is dictated by how helpful the staff member in customer service was, how accurately their order was picked, how accurate the paperwork is, how hassle-free it is to do business with you.

So how effective are your workgroups? In all probability, they cover the full spectrum from groups of individuals to a high performance team.

Do you play golf? If so, you will know only too well that the key to a good round is avoiding the double and triple bogies. It's the same with your workgroups. Your company's performance will benefit more from effort expended on the poorer performing workgroups than it will by concentrating on the star performers.

How do you know how effective your workgroups are? Ask them using Towards Ten Thousand, our workgroup assessment survey.

One of the major reasons why we continue to treat the symptoms and ignore the causes is that the former tactic is more likely to result in an immediate "cure". Uncovering the cause takes time and intelligent analysis. The reward is a cure that might take longer to take effect but which provides a permanent solution.

So why not spend some time in January making a list of swamps that you need to drain?

Graham Haines - December 2007