

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

November 1, 2004

Tackle That Problem Now!!

by Dr. Mike Armour

I still draw frequently on a slogan I came across 30 years ago, in my very first consulting engagement.

My client owned a chain of stores around the San Francisco Bay Area.. He was particularly skilled at developing young management talent, and his managers turned to him eagerly for guidance. With a certain regularity they would individually come to his corporate office to discuss a particularly thorny issue.

From behind his desk he would listen intently as they described the problem in their store. Finally he would lean forward, clasp his hands, and ask, "So what steps have you taken to correct this matter?" Often their response was something like this: "Well, I've been doing a lot of thinking about it, but I'm just not sure what to do."

At that point he would lean back in his chair and point to a sign positioned strategically above his head. It read quite simply, "It's difficult to make mid-course corrections with a stationary object."

A Bias For Action

I've always loved that sentiment. My client was a man of action. He was the proverbial rolling stone that gathered no moss. He had made his mark in the business world by acting decisively when opportunities presented themselves.

He knew that no amount of "thinking about it" ever solves management or organizational problems. Ultimately we solve problems only by pursuing first one alternative, then another, until we find something that works. And so long as we are merely "thinking about" the problem, we're not testing alternatives.

This is not to say that we should respond to problems by rushing off willy-nilly, implementing the first solution that comes to mind. When serious problems confront us, careful reflection should precede action. But careful reflection sometimes gives way to endless reflection. We keep thinking about the problem. And thinking about it. And thinking about it – the so-called paralysis of analysis. Or we get caught up in a search for the "perfect solution" rather than merely a workable one.

It's rare that our first stab at solving a problem works perfectly. Carrying through on most solutions demands some fine-tuning along the way. A few "mid-course corrections." But we can't make mid-course corrections while the plane is still sitting in the hangar.

That's why my client pressed his managers to develop a bias toward taking action. When managers tried a solution that didn't work, all he asked of them was to identify what they had learned from the experience. What new insights had they gained? What further aspects of the problem had their attempted solution uncovered? And most importantly, based on that feedback, what would they do next?

Learning By Doing

In this regard he was like the banker who was approached by a young loan officer and asked, "What's the secret of success in banking?" The banker said, "Making good loans."

"And how do I learn to make good loans?" the young man asked. "Through experience," his mentor replied.

"And how do I gain experience?" the aspiring loan officer inquired. "By making bad loans," the banker answered.

Viewed this way, action is the entryway to learning. We learn by doing. By taking action.

It's all too easy to convince ourselves (and sometimes those around us) that we are working on a problem by continuing to think about it. And early on, while devoting initial reflection to the problem, that may be true. But there quickly comes a point at which further thinking about the problem no longer constitutes "working on it." Instead, we are merely mulling it over in our mind.

Working on it means doing something. Taking action. Seeing what works, what doesn't. And making mid-course corrections based on feedback.

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