



Stop Playing the “Executive Whack-A-Mole” Game

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Do you know leaders who solve problems daily? Of course; all leaders do this. Isn't that the major function of leaders? When leaders solve problems, the organization performs better and employees get along better together. Solving problems is critical to business success.

Unfortunately, there is a paradox in most organizations where the leader is served up a never-ending supply of problems to resolve. Let's picture a leader named Alice. She comes to work on a typical day with 2-3 problems left over from the previous night. Her calendar is jammed with meetings to report on the status of problems or work on emergency situations. She “inherits” several new problems or crises every day. Sometimes the problems are waiting for her outside her door when she arrives in the morning. There are certain to be several new ones when she looks at her inbox. She instinctively knows the organization could run a lot better, but there is simply no time to even work on a good strategic plan. So, poor Alice runs herself ragged and just keeps her head out of the water on most days. She goes home exhausted, kicks the dog, and tries to clear out a few more issues online before going to bed.

I call this condition the “Executive Whack-A-Mole” syndrome, after the famous carnival game. Every time a mole comes out of one of the holes you whack it down, but there are others emerging all the time. You can never get them all down at the same time, and they keep coming up faster and faster. This problem is not universal, but it is far too common in most organizations. There is a way out of the maze, but it requires courage and vision. The way out is to invest time creating an improved culture within the organization. Leaders need to see their prime role as creators of culture, not just problem solvers. Developing an environment of higher trust is an investment that pays off many times over the cost. This shift in mindset has numerous advantages.

First, carving out time where the entire team can work on trust issues will result in less friction between people in the future. Since many of the “problems” have to do with people being unable to work together, this investment pays off in two ways. 1) Employees work better together with fewer problems, and 2) employee satisfaction improves, resulting in greater productivity.

Second, by focusing on teamwork, the leader emphasizes that all employees are capable of solving the inevitable business problems. The leader has many willing hands to lighten the load of problem solving in the future. The employees feel good about having greater responsibility as well. They become empowered and trusted to handle many situations previously delegated upward to the leader.

Third, the tendency toward executive burnout is greatly reduced when there is time set aside to work on the culture. Getting out of the “rat race” every few weeks to think about what is happening is cathartic. People have the opportunity to vent and rebuild relationships in a “safe” atmosphere. In some situations this is best handled with the help of an outside expert schooled in conflict resolution. This is especially important if the leader is part of the problem. Working on the culture is usually expanded to include better strategic planning and vision definition. Now employees have a stronger stake in the future of the organization because they helped define it. This ownership means they will put forth more effort to make it a reality.

When working with executives, I nudge them to consider devoting 15-20% of their calendar time each quarter working to develop an improved culture of trust. That means scheduling their time and that of their team to get away from the office and do some capability building. When I suggest this, most executives look at me as if I am from another planet. They will say something like, “You must be insane. We could not possibly carve out that much time to be away from the office. You obviously do not have a clue how busy I am.” I simply tell them to enjoy their “Whack-a-mole” game because, with their perspective, there is no way out of it.

In the time crunch on every executive, many believe it is impossible to invest as much as a full day every three or four weeks. They are too busy solving problems and crises. However, those leaders who do carve out that much time, find the payoff is far greater than the investment. It leads to a stronger, more productive, and less problem-filled organization. It also leads to fewer health problems due to burnout.

The preceding information was adapted from the book *The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

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The logo features the word "The" in a small, black, sans-serif font above the word "TRUST" in a large, bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letter "U" in "TRUST" is stylized with a grey keyhole shape inside it. Below "TRUST" is the word "Ambassador" in a bold, black, sans-serif font.