



Avoid Playing Whac-A-Mole

Have you ever gone to a fair or exhibition that has rides and games for young people? Occasionally you come across a game called "Whac-A-Mole". A typical Whac-A-Mole machine consists of a large, waist-level cabinet with five holes in the top and a large, soft, black mallet. Each hole contains a single plastic mole and the machinery necessary to move it up and down. Once the game starts, the moles will begin to pop up from their holes at random, every half second. You move your mallet around trying to rack up as many points as possible. The object of the game is to force the individual moles back into their holes by hitting them directly on the head with the mallet, thereby adding to your score. The more quickly this is done, the higher the final score will be. I've learned to be cynical of this game because it seems to me to represent life too much.

Being a manager can often resemble playing WHAC-A-Mole. An issue arises that requires immediate attention, a quick answer or directive. Just as that issue is 'pointed out', another one pops up. Repeatedly, all day long, one issue after the other consumes your time and energy. It doesn't seem to stop until the end of the day... only to restart the next morning.

A well-structured company will always require a manager to deal with issues, but a poorly structured company requires the manager to deal with all or too many issues.

I'm a big fan of the book "The Four Disciplines of Execution" (Chris McChesney, Jim Huling and Sean Covey). This great book introduces the reader to an all too familiar topic: the "whirlwind"; the daily activity that takes you away from achieving your goals in business/life. They are necessary in operations but distract from the important things in your organization (or life).

Sometimes it is friends and family that project too much drama into your day for the content being presented. They needlessly drag us into issues that absorb countless minutes and hours of uselessness. If we are not careful, we can waste irredeemable swaths of our lives dealing with urgent nothingness.

I have developed two responses that seem to have minimized this life tendency significantly (these are neither exclusive nor exhaustive). The first is not actually a response because it's my habit of

'non-response'. Too often we need to be needed so when any issue arises, our knee jerk response is to put our two cents worth into it. This does NOT need to happen. Many conflicts can solve themselves without our input. Just because we are given a mallet to Whac a Mole doesn't automatically mean we 'NEED' to use it at the first sight of a rodent (problem). If we can't hold our own tongue, too often we are the problem... not the solution. Developing additional patience and trust for those around us reduces the tendency to be the prima donna (definition: An overly sensitive person who is temperamental and difficult to work with). This requires self confidence in yourself and your future, but focusing on the truly important requires the need to weed out the urgent. Being indispensable for the important issues needs us to distance ourselves from the simple, urgent issues.

The second response is the pre-empting of issues before the issues occur. Seeing danger or conflicts before they become an issue is the requirement of every great manager. It's the 30,000 foot perspective and it's the ability to see the why or the how in the urgent thing that is developing. To see it in the first place, not just see it as it comes to our desk or into our life.

Once we see why or how it's being developed, we must pinch off the process at the point of origin. Under most circumstances this requires a small

fraction of time and effort to solve an issue. However, properly solved it will reduce the long-term exposure to the urgent. Well worth the investment.

Avoiding the Whac-A-Mole game is critical to developing a great company and team. It's certainly not easy but it is always worth the effort.

About the Author:

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