

CPR for business

Businesses don't fail or succeed all at once. The initial stages of most enterprises are gradual as momentum is established. The "S-curve" accelerates as the boom of a new service or product takes off. Predictably, business begins to flatten as the market reaches saturation and the "wild ride" is replaced with a period that demands caution, innovation, revitalization and an injection of enthusiasm.

Organizations develop early signals of potential hard times in isolated teams rather than all departments at once. These early signals are often observed, but not considered important enough to examine further - yet. At the first indication of potential trouble, think CPR (cues, problems and remedies).

Cues - Cues or symptoms come first. A cue is a signal that something is wrong. It may be excessive turnover, general apathy or customer complaints. Too often, people tend to label these conditions as "problems" rather than the cues/symptoms that lead to a deeper root. A common misdiagnosed condition is that, "The problem is that people aren't communicating." Poor communications are a symptom that ought to cue further investigation into its root cause.

Problems - Root problem identification comes second. The two similar approaches that help people identify root problems are the "5-Why?" drill or "How did things get to be this way?" asked and answered five times.

To carry forward the "communications" example from above - the typical response is to engage people in communications training. When communications are poor, it is most likely that people just don't like each other enough to share valuable information. If communications training solves the problem at a root level, it is probably that the learning environment generates a "likeability" among participants rather than the impact of course content.

Another all-too-quick reaction in many organizations is an exponential increase in e-mail accounts so that everyone can communicate with everyone else. People who don't like each other use e-mail less to share critical information than to overload the in-box with trivia. Still, valuable information is not shared between people who don't like each other even though e-mail traffic may increase.

The good news about finding the root problem is that more than one symptom will evaporate as the problem is remedied. Similar to medical

ailments, once the root problem is taken care of, a potentially long list of symptoms disappear - fever, pain, immobility, fatigue and irritability. The organization parallel related to likeability

diminishes mistrust, frustration, avoidance, withholding and sabotage.

Remedies - What can be done about it comes third. We always recommend that a list of potential remedies be brainstormed and then prioritized by the investment in people, time and money that it will take to achieve success. Arrange the list so that the lowest investment activities are at the top of the list. Start with the lowest viable investment activities first to maximize the return-on-investment.

What might cause people to like each other enough to share information with each other more readily? The list might include employee profiles in the monthly newsletter, holding a Friday job-story swap meet with everyone invited, genuine team awards to fuel a pizza party, and a local mix-and-mingle vacation night for a troubled work group. Note that the dollar cost of the first couple of options is near zero.

Employees close to the gritty issues often know the real problems and are often amazed at the myriad of ill-advised and costly solutions engaged in an effort to make improvements. When the wrong fix is applied to a symptom rather than a root problem, it erodes confidence. When confidence erodes the workforce hesitates.

When the workload increases because of hesitation, additional workers are often hired to pick up the slack. When enough additional workers are hired beyond the point of sustaining financially viable operations, a layoff or other cutbacks are considered. These are also cues of a dangerous spiral. It is also a backward illustration of "How did things get to be this way?"

CPR is often too little and too late. It doesn't have to be that way in business even though that pattern is gaining strength.



JOSEPH J. LACROIX

Joseph J. Lacroix is the founder and president of LTI and a principal at Quality of WorkLife Consultants in Newport News. He can be reached at 591-0807 or Joe@LTODI.com.