

LEADERSHIP UPDATE



Management Triage – Managing Your *Most Important Things*

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June 2006

A few weeks back I was visiting with Steve Harrison, VP at Sierra Nevada Brewery, one of our clients. We were discussing the amazing feat his company has achieved – exceptional growth yet maintaining excellent financial controls -with exceptionally “thin” overhead. Steve described their process: “we have been very good at identifying the most important things and getting them done.”

Steve nailed it. Indeed, he and Ken Grossman, (President and Founder), have done an incredible job of identifying the most important things to do - as well as not to do. This is related to an ongoing discussion I have with my colleague, Ed Street, retired AirTouch Finance Director and currently teaching management courses at Sac State. We like to discuss the “tension” between carrying out the company’s vision and getting all the work done. All too often we see companies getting caught up in a lot of activity that is only slightly related to carrying out their vision.

Being vigilant in making sure all the activity that is going on in your organization is prioritized by its impact in achieving your vision is an essential leadership job. Actually it’s where leadership and management connect. It really is “doing the right things and doing things right.” That’s what Ken Grossman and Steve Harrison have done so well at Sierra Nevada. It’s probably not that apparent to the casual observer when you actually see it in action. It looks like most businesses. Everyone is busy; people are very engaged in meeting schedules. Then take a look at the results, particularly over a 3-5 year period. That is usually where great performance based on doing the most important things shows up.

It is so easy to let daily incidents and pressures interfere with the prioritization system. Let me describe a recent experience that really helped me get clarity on this process. I had occasion to be observing the happenings in the emergency room at Sacramento Mercy Hospital one evening last July. Concurrently, there was a one day nurses’ strike at the UC Davis Hospital. Consequently, their emergency room was closed that evening and all emergency care was being

diverted to Mercy Hospital. It was chaotic; except for the triage nurse.

It was not a pretty sight. All gurneys and wheelchairs were taken and people with broken bones and massive abrasions had to sit in chairs and wait for their priority to get them in the system. Medical triage is described as “the sorting and allocation of treatment according to a system of priorities to maximize the number of survivors.” I saw it in action. That triage nurse had a tough job, but she handled it with calm and confidence. She knew the importance of the job she was doing and it’s contribution to everyone’s benefit, even in the face of chaos.

Now let’s take a look at the definition of management triage: it’s “the assigning of priority order to projects on the basis of where funds and resources can best be used to achieve your vision (emphasis added). Our experience in our consulting is this: as organizations grow, this process often becomes diffused and weakened. Much has been written in management literature in the past two or three years about this phenomenon – poor execution. This is the critical point where poor execution is spawned. The most important things get lost in the shuffle.

The offset to this problem can be seen in the system of managing the implementation of your Strategic Plan. It’s done with an Action Plan that accomplishes exactly the definition of “management triage.” Managing this process well enables the alignment of the high impact projects with the resources to get them accomplished. This is strategic to achieving sustained, effective results.

Take a look at your “management triage process.” Do you have absolute clarity that it’s working well? If not, this may well be your next most important thing.

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