

## Tryin' To Catch Up With That 8-Ball

If you ask my friend Fred how he's doing, his standard answer is: "Tryin' to catch up." Fred is perpetually behind the eight ball. He runs a business that pays him a reasonably good salary, but rarely makes him a profit. And that's especially sad, because his product is in demand, and he could sell a lot more of it if he only had time to sell. But Fred spends most of his time chasing the "crisis du jour" — his term, by the way, and not really accurate because for Fred, it's really more about the crisis of the moment.

Do you spend too much of your day trying to catch up with your eight-ball? If so, here are some thoughts that might help.

### Micromanagement

I have written in the past that I think micromanagement is a good thing. That tends to freak people out, so let me clarify. I think *overmanagement* is a bad thing. I define *micromanagement* as making sure that everything from the big things to the little things gets done and done right. I define *overmanagement* as providing more management than is necessary. Fred is an overmanager. He has made it clear that he wants all of his employees to come to him with any problems, so he can solve them, his way.

I think Fred is missing out on a huge opportunity, primarily in the area of team-building. Peter Drucker wrote a famous column on team-building for The Wall Street Journal in 1992. In it, he noted that "team-building has become a buzzword in American business. The results are not overly impressive." The reason for that, he explained, was "the all-but-universal belief that there is just one kind of team." He then explained that there are three types of teams, the baseball-type team, the football-type team, and the tennis doubles-type team. Fred has applications for all three types in his business — and you probably do too — but this specific issue is a perfect opportunity for the tennis doubles-type team.

The key to doubles tennis is for the players to support each other, and that requires a high level of anticipation/familiarity. If I know where my partner is — or is going to be — I can move to the right spot on the court to support his/her play. And vice versa. Now, how does that apply to business? If your "partners" know what you would want them to do, they don't have to ask you and you don't need to tell them how to solve every problem.

You can't cure overmanagement overnight — from either side of the equation! — but the process is pretty straightforward. I would ask Fred not to just *tell* someone how to solve a problem, but rather, to *ask* them what they would do if he wasn't around to tell them. Based on the answer, he could either teach or empower. Or, perhaps, teach *and* empower. If he didn't like the employee's solution he could say: "I'd rather have you handle it this way." If he did, he could say: "Next time something like this comes up, just solve it the same way." Either way, he could say: "Now you know how I'd like you to handle a situation like this. You don't need to ask me for permission."

Please note that "a situation like this" carries both opportunity and risk. The opportunity is to foster even further initiative. The risk is to flirt with mistakes at the point where the employee is confident enough to make a decision in a similar-but-not-exactly-the-same situation, but it's not the decision the boss would have wanted. Hopefully those mistakes won't be critical. And also hopefully, they'll be used as teaching opportunities, which continues the process of training followed by empowerment.

The end result of all of this can be "partners" who can make sure that everything from the big things to the little things gets done and done right, within their areas of empowerment. If Fred could trust his employees to make the right decisions, he would free himself up to do any number of other things. Personally, I think he has some pretty smart people working for him, who would respond well to this sort of teaching and empowerment. I think they'd also respond well to being treated as *partners*, not in the financial sense, perhaps, but in terms being trusted to do the right thing in support of the team's goals.

### Blocks and Hats

I would also ask Fred to start planning his day around *blocks* and *hats*. Like you, Fred wears multiple hats. He's the chief executive officer, the chief operating officer, the chief financial officer and the chief sales officer, just to name a few. Please note the lower-case letters, by the way. These are *hats*, not formal titles, but that's very typical of a small business. Ultimately, the owner is responsible for making sure that everything from the big things to the little things gets done and done right in these areas — or to put that another way, ultimately the owner is the one who benefits or suffers the most based on his or her team's performance.

On any given day, Fred might have 3-6 tasks that connect to each hat. My point is that he can probably create some efficiency in all of this by working at similar tasks in sequence, as opposed to jumping from one hat to the

next. Fred is very familiar with “the zone.” He has a favorite story about getting “into the zone” on his bowling night a few years ago, which resulted in 19 strikes in a row — 3 at the end of the first game, 12 for a perfect 300 score in the second game, and then 4 more to start the third game.

The way Fred tells the story, it was all about focus. “I wasn’t thinking about work. I wasn’t thinking about what I was doing next. I was thinking about what I was doing *now*.”

If he could bring that level of focus to his work, I’m pretty sure that he could find a similar “zone” effect. How about you? Could you get more done in terms of, say, your sales hat if you could set aside an hour to work on nothing but sales? OK, here comes the big question. *Why can’t you?*

### **Interruptions vs. Opportunities**

I think I know the answer. Planning a block of time to work exclusively on sales — or anything else — is one thing. Sticking to that plan is another thing altogether. I have another friend who claims that his ratio of known tasks to interruptions is 5 to 1. For every task he puts on his plate on any given day, he says, 5 more appear during the course of the day. I think he may be exaggerating, but maybe not. Like Fred, he sells a product that’s in high demand. But also like Fred, he could cut down on the number of issues *he* has to deal with by teaching and empowering his employees.

He could also gain some perspective, I think, by separating these additional tasks into two categories — *interruptions* and *opportunities*. The separation process is elegant in its simplicity. *Do I gain something by adding this task to my plate?* If so, it’s an opportunity. *Do I lose something by adding this task to my plate?* If so — and the principal currency we’re talking about here is *time* — it’s an interruption. Opportunities can range from low to high in terms of priority. Interruptions can only be low. *Therefore, don’t even think about changing your plans for interruptions, only for opportunities. And even then, measure the importance/priority of the opportunity against what was already on your plate!*

One of the realities of management, especially in a small business, is that you will almost always have more known tasks plus new opportunities than you will have hours in the day. In other words, you will never have enough time to do all of the things that you could be/should be doing. Once you understand that some things *must* be left undone, the question becomes *which things?* And the best answer to that is *the lowest priority things*.

Here’s another way of looking at that. In addition to connecting every task to a *hat* in search of efficiency, it’s equally good strategy to connect every task to a *person* to assist you with prioritization. Because it’s true, isn’t it, that every task on your plate represents something to be done *for, with or to* some individual? If you complete the task, that person will be happy. (Well, maybe not in the “to” situation.) If you don’t complete the task — or if you delay completing it — that person will not be happy. Your time limitations make it virtually certain that some people will be less-than-completely happy with you. Here’s the good news. You get to choose who that will be!

That’s ultimately what prioritization is all about. If you can’t do everything, do the most important things, and in business, that’s mostly about the most important people. Your customers are usually more important than your suppliers. High-value prospects are usually more important than low-value customers. High-value employees may be more important than even customers or prospects. None of this is universal, often it will be case-by-case, but the bottom line is that some things are more important than others, and the greatest opportunity in front of you is simply to manage your time with that in mind.

You may never catch up with your eight-ball. I don’t think Fred ever will. But some people make more money chasing their eight-ball than others. Isn’t that who you want to be?