Do You Get My Drift?

I told my "airplane story" to a group of printers a few weeks ago. In addition to presenting a sales seminar, I had also been asked to deliver a motivational keynote, so I told them about my recovery from the injuries I suffered when the single engine in my single-engine airplane blew up—and when the truck pulled out onto the stretch of road I was hoping to use for an emergency landing!

That all happened almost 11 years ago, but I still get asked about it fairly frequently. And the reason I'm mentioning it today is that one of the attendees at that event asked me an interesting question. "Someone told me that airplanes always drift to one side," he said, "no matter how straight you point them. Why is that?"

In The Air

I explained that an airplane flies *in the air* in addition to *through the air*, and the movement of the air itself (read that: wind) will affect the airplane's path. For example, if you point the airplane straight north, and there's a wind blowing from the east, the airplane will drift to the west.

"So how do you stop that?" the printer asked.

"You can't stop it," I answered, "but you can correct for it. If you're drifting a little to the west, you point the nose of the airplane a little to the east. The technique is called 'crabbing' and it can look a little funny, but it gets you where you're going."

"OK," he said, "that makes sense. Now how do I stop myself from drifting?"

Reactive/Proactive

"Aha!" I said. "That takes us to the crux of the matter, doesn't it? I'm not sure it's really possibly to *stop* yourself from drifting, but I think you can *minimize* it. And that all starts by being *proactive* rather than *reactive*."

Let's consider this. When your business is predicated on customers and customer service, there will always be times when reactive issues are your top priorities. For example, if a machine goes down when you're running a rush job for your most important customer, reacting to that situation probably goes right to the top of the list.

But that's not always a *drifting* situation. Let's consider Printer A, who starts off the day with a plan: an hour's worth of organization from 8:00 AM to 9:00 AM, including the daily production meeting, then the rest of the day divided into 2-hour blocks. From 9:00 to 11:00, his plan is to work on estimates. From 11:00 to 1:00, the plan is to cover the front counter and the phones while his CSRs cycle out to lunch. From 1:00 to 3:00 the plan is to make sales calls, and from 3:00 to 5:00, to review the day's activity, make sure everything's in place for the next day, and deal with any other issues that have come up during the day.

Printer B, on the other hand, starts the day off with no particular plan in mind. He has a vague sense of the work that's on his desk—estimates, orders, things he needs to order, etc.—but beyond that, his "plan" is to deal with whatever issues come up during the day. He sees himself more as a fireman than a manager, and he never seems to run out of fires that need to be put out.

I think it's obvious that Printer B is a drifter, and that Printer A's going to get more accomplished in a typical day. The bigger question, though, is whether *you're* Printer A or Printer B, or more likely, whether your approach to your business falls somewhere in between those two extremes. I know a few (though not many) printers who are as proactive and well-organized as Printer A. Sadly, I know quite a few printers who are as reactive—and disorganized!—as Printer B.

"Blocks" and "Hats"

If you are somewhere in between those extremes, I would suggest that a combination of "block" and "hat" strategies might be your best approach to drift-avoidance. This starts with the understanding that you do wear a number of hats as the owner of a small business—the General Manager hat, the Strategic Planner hat, the CFO hat and possibly the Accounting Clerk hat too, just to name a few.

My recommendation is to set up specific times to wear each hat. For example, you might set up your day in blocks like Printer A. From 9:00 to 10:00 could be your Estimator block, and from 10:00 to 11:00 could be your CFO/Accounting Clerk block. From 11:00 to 1:00 could be your Counter & Phones block, and from 1:00 to 3:00 could be your Sales Block. From 3:00 to 5:00 could be your General Manager block, and every Wednesday, you could put on your Strategic Planning hat for an hour as part of that block.

The basic idea here is that you put on each hat during specified times each day, and while you're wearing that hat, you *only* do work that's connected to that function of your business. In other words, if a General Manager issue comes up 30 minutes into your Sales Block, you don't automatically put that sales work aside to deal with the new issue. Instead, you evaluate the urgency of the new issue, and unless it's something urgent and important, you set *it* aside and deal with it next time you're scheduled to put on your General Manager hat.

Two Levels

You might also think of this as a way to build two levels of prioritization into your typical day. On the "lower" level, you should prioritize the tasks that are connected to each hat; for example, you might have six things-to-do while wearing your CFO/Accounting Clerk hat today, and nine things-to-do while wearing your Sales hat. After ranking them in priority order, you might realize that the eighth item under your Sales hat is more important than the first item under your CFO/Accounting Clerk hat, which might lead you to an "upper level" decision to "borrow" some time from that particular hat today. Alternately, you might come to the end of the Sales block with a few things undone, but some more important issues to deal with under your General Manager hat. In that case, you move on, and pick up on those Sales activities tomorrow.

Bottom Line

To summarize all of this, it's probably not possible to keep yourself from drifting at least a little bit from all that you could be/should be doing in managing your business, and in management, the solution is not quite as simple as just pointing yourself into the wind. It is as simple as planning and prioritization, though, and I hope you'll find my "block" and "hat" strategies to be effective ways to accomplish that.