

Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Have you ever tried to kill a flea using a sledge hammer? It sounds rather ridiculous, yet that's precisely the approach many managers use to deal with minor, often one-time problems.

As a case-in-point, I once worked in an organization with serious issues of distrust, information withholding, and miscommunications. A useful tool for alleviating some of these issues was an e-mail option that allowed individuals to send an e-mail message to all employees in the company. It was a convenient, infrequently used selection that served to communicate free event tickets, data server problems, employee after-work activities, major building repairs, and other items of interest.

One day, an e-mail went out from the IS department communicating problems with misuse of e-mail and the internet. Ironically, a systems employee, concerned about his personal freedoms at work, responded with a scathing e-mail to all employees pointing out his dissatisfaction with the content of the message. In his e-mail he used phrases like "e-mail Gestapo" and "internet police." The CEO, being on the e-mail list, read the e-mail and immediately called the IS Director who quickly declared that only certain authorized personnel would be allowed to use the all-employee e-mail option and only for communications deemed "appropriate" by the Public Relations Department.

The result? Electronic communications to all employees essentially dried up. This, in a company that had received considerable feedback year after year that communications were a serious problem. The flea was dead, but the death blow scattered debris throughout the organization and everyone paid a price.

I once worked with a division president who insisted that everyone work a 40-hour week by starting work at 8 am sharp. What he failed to consider was that despite arriving for work 10 minutes late, most employees were staying late and working 50 hours or more each week. When he began communicating his directive, employees were quick to respond that they would be happy to arrive at 8 am and leave promptly at 4:30 pm. Who wouldn't?

In other businesses, we've all seen community bulletin boards that were removed because someone abused the privilege, or policies created for the entire organization in order to address a problem with one employee. On a larger scale, consider hasty, broad-brush decisions to freeze salaries, lay off workers, and close plants to deal with a temporary market downturn. The question in all this is what is the cost to the business for using a sledge hammer approach rather than dealing with problems specifically and directly.

One of my clients was recently dealing with the issue of consistency versus marketplace flexibility and recognized that a one-size-fits-all decision was overkill for solving a problem at one site. Forcing all operations to conform to a consistent policy helped out the division that had the problem, but it also had a negative impact on profitability in the rest of the organization.

In dealing with these kinds of issues, this manager continues to emphasize that most of their company policies are guidelines to be applied as appropriate to the situation. To be successful, they can't be afraid of exceptions or inconsistencies between operations.

Although the sledge hammer is a useful tool when the situation dictates, when overused it can create long-lasting or widespread and unintentional damage that is difficult to repair. As in pest control, targeted solutions can alleviate these problems.

And the next time you find yourself dealing with fleas, consider using the flyswatter first. It will do wonders in preserving other valuable assets that may be hard to replace later.

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At Ascent we believe that organizations are only as successful as the systems that engage the individuals who work there. Ascent Management Consulting is committed to creating management, culture, organization, and governance systems that enable personal fulfillment and organization effectiveness.

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