

Sticking to a System

by Todd Alexander

My daughter brought home her first grade report card the other day. As I reviewed it I saw that success in the first grade and success in the working world have a lot in common. I quickly scanned the headings at the top of the page: left side = excellent, middle = okay, right side = poor. I was in too much of a hurry to analyze the format. Besides, it wasn't information I was interested in. It was confirmation that my daughter was not just a good student, but a great one. A third of the way down the page there were two check marks that were not in the left column but in the middle one. Another third brought a few more marks in the middle and almost at the end was a check in the box on the right hand side. The line item read: "Focus: stays on task." When I asked Haley's teacher about her marks she explained that while my daughter is an excellent student, she sometimes gets distracted and loses focus. Furthermore, she explained, each of her low marks were in some way tied to Haley's lack of focus.

While I know that school is more than grades and my love for my daughter isn't based on how she performs, I also know that our ability to focus can many times determine our level of success. It does not take long for us to realize that those who have the ability to focus usually get more accomplished than those who lose focus.

I just completed a follow-up session with a team I had worked with six months prior. At our original session we spent a fair amount of time determining the team's critical priorities. The team left the session with a list of priorities, a set of action plans, and some defined milestones and targets in order to track their progress. As I talked with the team leader prior to the follow-up session, he explained that the team had been hit by a number of surprises. Those surprises had pulled them off-course and had affected the team's ability to make progress on its critical priorities. In reality, they had been pulled away to address an immediate issue and stayed in that mode instead of coming back to their priorities.

As we went through the follow-up session and reprioritized their critical issues, the same issues came up as in the original session. The team's response was interesting. They said that if they followed through on their actions related to their priorities they could have averted some of the crises that came up later. Sounds similar to my daughter's first grade lesson on focus. Most of us can probably relate to this team's dilemma.

Today's work environment is full of changes and crises that distract us, challenge our priorities and cause us to lose focus. Some teams and individuals have given up planning and prioritizing altogether and simply deal with what is in front of them at any moment. The problems with that approach are: 1) you never get ahead, 2) you never improve and 3) your work is defined by crisis and demand, rather than by strategy or planning.

So then, how do you stay focused in the midst of crisis and change? By sticking to a system that helps you stay focused on what's most important. At IMPAQ we talk a lot about systems. A "system" is simply a way of operating and may involve a number of processes that together lead to accomplishing the objective. The team I spoke of had a

system in place. They had processes for developing a strategy, determining priorities, creating project plans, action planning, tracking and evaluation. Their problem was not the lack of a system, but rather not sticking to the system they had.

The important thing to remember is there is no magic in “the system.” The power of any system is it’s ability to help us stay focused and to pull us back on track when we stray. Here are a couple of ideas to help you use a system to maintain your focus:

Set your course and distinguish between your destination and your distractions. A few years ago some friends and I took a small boat from Newport Harbor to Catalina Island. On a map this is a 27 mile trip across open ocean. My friend let me steer the boat with instructions to keep the compass at a certain heading. The problem was that the swells would hit the boat and knock us off-course. I would make the correction and then we'd get knocked off-course in the other direction. I was quickly turning our 27 mile straight shot into a 50 mile zigzag seasick cruise.

After a few miles a larger, faster boat passed us. They seemed to be on a straighter course so I started following them. After about half an hour I realized we were again off-course when I could see Catalina in the distance directly off the left side of the boat. Even though our path was straighter, we were now heading for Santa Barbara instead of Catalina. My friend finally came to my rescue and politely told me, "Keep your eye on the island and head for the notch in the mountain. Just keep your eye on your destination, steer the boat in that direction and you'll get to where you want to go."

One of the challenges we all face today is raising our heads out of what we are engrossed in to remind ourselves of where we want to go. Make sure you have a well defined goal and that all those involved have a clear understanding of what you are trying to accomplish. Be sure to distinguish between the destination and the methods you'll use to get there. If people only see the means but not the end it becomes difficult to catch ourselves when we get off- course. When we lose sight of our destination it becomes easier to fall prey to distractions. We can never eliminate the distractions, but we must recognize them for what they are.

Build in flexibility and recovery mechanisms. While effective systems are always focused on achieving the desired outcomes, they are also dynamic and flexible. No matter how good a job we do of planning and strategizing, there will be times when we must deviate from our plans. There may be times when we must step away from our priorities or operate outside the system for a period of time in order to respond to a situation. It happens.

The problem develops when we depart from the system and never come back to it. This is the trap I see most teams and organizations fall into. For example, a critical item comes up that takes precedence over all standing priorities. Rather than abandon all current priorities, the new situation should be evaluated in light of the current list. A decision should be made to depart from the current priorities and a time should be set to come back to that list and continue where you left-off.

Instead of using the situation as a means to abandon your focus, use your focus as a means to evaluate the situation. I'm convinced this approach would lead to progress.

Evaluate often. Every improvement system should have some form of milestones and measurements attached that make it possible to track and evaluate progress. There is a lot of truth to the adage that people respond more to what we inspect rather than what we expect.

Frequent evaluation is the way we inspect our progress. Our natural tendency might be to ignore something that we have failed to work on because we're embarrassed by our lack of progress. In reality it's important to bring it up as a way of keeping it alive even if we have to postpone it temporarily. Frequent tracking and measurement help us to refocus, recommit or make the necessary adjustments.

Discipline. Discipline. Discipline. Some people do not like the "D" word because it conjures up images of sweat, toil and pain. The truth is that when things get busy and overwhelm sets in, the best path out is usually through discipline. Planning helps us link our actions to our outcomes and discipline provides the extra commitment to follow through on those actions. I can't think of a single example of repeated high performance that has not been accomplished through the application of discipline. It takes discipline to stick to a system...especially when you don't feel like doing it.

Celebrate. Celebrate. Celebrate. One of the payoffs of our focus and discipline is the celebration at the end-of-the-line. This is one of the things I don't see many teams doing. Most teams I see today move from one thing to the next without ever taking the time to appreciate their accomplishments. Over time this can contribute to burn out and a loss of motivation. In many cases it is just taking the time to reflect on our progress or accomplishments, to recognize contributions and to share congratulations. Of course you can do more, but if we never take the time to celebrate, people begin to feel they are on a treadmill that never stops.

Most organizations are more sophisticated and complex than they were 20 years ago, but one thing has not changed. People want to feel good about their contributions and accomplishments.

The easiest thing to do in today's fast paced, rapidly changing environment is to focus on the immediate. There will never be a shortage of urgent issues and crises of all shapes and sizes that we could take on. If we are not careful those things can hold us hostage, preventing us from ever taking on the issues that are far more important in the long run.

In the end, it's all about choices. The choices we have to make today are not between what is good and what is bad, but between what is good and which is the best. Without focus it is difficult for us to make those right choices. Using a system will allow us to keep our focus. See you in the left hand columns.