

Adequacy : The Duct Tape of Business

Getting Past the “Check-the-Box” Mentality

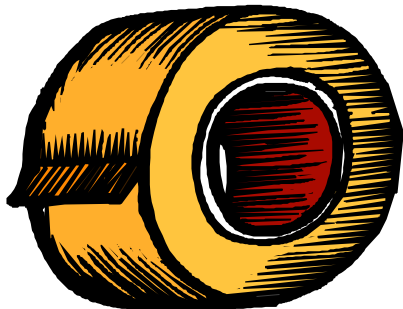


There’s a sign affixed to the metered light on a nearby freeway onramp: “2 CAR PER GREEN”. This is not a typo—the sign once read, “1 CAR PER GREEN”—but when the Commissioner of Exhaust met with the state’s Director of Bumper-to-Bumper traffic, and they decided to allow two cars to proceed per green light, they didn’t make expectations clear when assigning the work to change the number. Or, maybe, the Secretary of Highway Grammar wasn’t invited to the meeting.

So, they sent someone out to change the number so appreciative drivers would more quickly get to their spot of asphalt on the freeway, versus the onramp, to sit out the log jam of the morning commute. However, the assigned worker from the Department of Signs and Road Kill obviously took the instructions literally—and didn’t pluralize “CAR.” This is what we mean by “Check the Box” Mentality. The person did what was instructed, but nothing more. One *could* argue he had “met expectations.”

Although a silly (but true) example of indifference or ignorance in business, there are many others that present great risk to companies. Some examples:

- There is noticeable discoloration on the wall above an electrical outlet into which a piece of heavy machinery is plugged. After the fire, several employees mention having noticed it, but thought it was someone else’s job to tend to such things.
- The Marketing Department sends an email blast to solicit business. Though the copy was previously edited and approved, a formatting change in the final iteration truncated “XYZ Corp—your greatest asset” to “XYZ Corp—your greatest ass.”



- People in your call center receive a flurry of complaints from customers about a recent fee increase. The service reps are told to follow the usual gripe script. After a number of clients moved to other providers, it was discovered that the fee increase had not even been implemented yet—that a systems glitch was the culprit.
- A smart person in your firm made a great decision to implement a leadership program that provides bottom line results. It’s called The Extraordinary Leader, by the Zenger | Folkman company, founded by the authors of the great book of the same title that we may have mentioned a million or so times. There’s a companion program, entitled The Extraordinary Performer, built on the same principles, but that is geared toward individual contributors: it educates them on the stages of leadership, and what it takes to achieve greatness at any level. The company will make sure everyone attends. But after the workshop, there’s no reinforcement. Everyone loved the program, but since nobody held them accountable for pursuing greatness, nothing much happened.

To put a stop to the Check the Box Mentality, there are a few basic practices that must be implemented to eradicate shortfalls in initiative, ownership, commitment and the like.

First, leaders need to decide how high their standards should be, then realize that everyone below them will watch for clues and indicators of those standards in practice.

As the imposition of higher standards trickles through the layers of management, there will be some erosion. Some of this may be due to interpretation, but most can be attributed to people’s natural inclination to revert to old habits. The real work is in practicing what is being preached, and then addressing the Box Checkers before the crisis hits.

It is not enough to post signs around the company touting your values and principles. They are a nice touch, but we haven’t seen many staff members revere them in the same way they would stop to behold an extraordinary

leader. Instead, staffers look for evidence that the leaders are following the principles posted on the signs.

Once true and demonstrable commitment is in place among leaders, the communication of standards for such things as safety, soundness, legal compliance, sales goals, etc., is in order. Examples are necessary to drive home HOW greatness is distinguished from adequacy in all tasks.

Assuming “someone else will handle it” is like putting duct tape on a leaky pipe...it’s a stop-gap, but not a solution.

Clearly, there is an easy way and a right way. Distinguish the two well—then watch profits and service soar.

For more information, check out the special supplement that accompanies this edition of Light pArticles.

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Although Henry VIII would have disagreed that some times are better than others to let loose of the guillotine, there weren't many HR Departments or lawyers around in the days of his reign. Nor did royalty think about anyone's feelings other than their own. Thankfully, corporate kingdoms are run differently now, and the rolling of heads is figurative.

Whether the grounds for termination is a lay-off or a firing, there are optimal times to let someone go. Aside from humanity and dignity, there are dollar reasons, too—the #1 reason people sue companies: they're mad.

Time of Year

It is unconscionable, in our opinions, to let people go in December unless the cause is the

last straw in a long line of disciplinary action, or something illegal or unethical has occurred. With looming holidays and year-end busy-ness that befalls everyone, a layoff at this time is cruel and inhuman.

Time of the Quarter/Month

Don't cheat people out of their earned incentives, if those depend on the completion of an entire quarter or month, by wielding the axe a day or two before the end. Likewise, if you know you are going to let someone go, don't try to squeeze a few more tasks or deadlines out of them before the boom is lowered. Others will notice the timing and lose respect for the boss. If the decision has been made, proceed; don't procrastinate.

Time of the Week

Contrary to what you may believe, the delivery of the bad news should NOT oc-

cur on a Friday or the end of the person's workweek. This condemns the departing employee to two days of torment over the weekend. Losing one's job is shocking, and akin to losing some control over one's destiny. Friday terminations compound the problem as the opportunity for making contacts and re-gaining some sort of control must wait. Mondays or Tuesdays are best.

Time of Day

Unless the decision is sudden and immediacy is critical, give some thought to the time of day. A dear friend of ours, who took the train to Los Angeles was laid off one morning—and had to sit around for several hours until he could catch the afternoon train make the return trip. Optimally, let someone go when there are few to no other staff around—and you are sure they have a way to get home.

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BIG DESK / LITTLE CUBE:

(a look at the varied perspectives of managers and employees)

THE COPIER

Tucked away into an ugly room is the office copier, frequented mostly by people with bosses of big titles and, occasionally, by people with medium titles. The copier is a source of many functions: gossip, due to the cover of sound; solace or secrecy, due to the relative privacy from supervisory eyeballs; and, of course, the reproduction of really funny jokes or must-have recipes.

The only times the copier *doesn't* work is when there is a crisis that requires the felling of another forest for an "important presentation at a meeting" or when an executive is trying to use it because he or

she can't spot a minion to press the Start button. Of course, this is not true of all execs—we know of a few closet types who sneak in early to copy their Fantasy Football rosters before the rank and file hit the doors.

Here are the biggest copier consternations, and they rest squarely on the shoulders of the users, regardless of title: (1) turning it ON in the morning and (2) leaving it with some paper in it. (NOTE: This does not include paper jams.) Just like the staff room coffee pot, there seems to be some office sport in the avoidance of ownership for these two apparently colossal tasks.

We actually know of folks who would travel to another department or floor before opening a new ream of paper and loading the copier. Some forward-thinking companies have now labeled nearby shelves or cupboards with the word "PAPER" as a hint to thwart this apathetic practice. Still, the disregard continues.

BIG DESK OCCUPANTS:

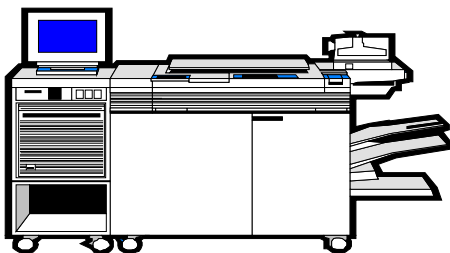
It is a rite of passage that once you are in a position to write the check that you don't have to use the equipment. But not knowing how to do so simply disables you when you are working really early or really late. All that we ask, on behalf of those who work for you, is that you at least turn the Power button to ON in the AM. You should know that the "Warming Up" function takes a long time—and cuts into productivity for the first user.

Little Cube Dwellers:

Some of you are really on the ball—posting instructional signs like "Do NOT copy your butt because it could be considered harassment" near the copier. However, it is your peer group that most often runs a mountain of collated and stapled reports and leaves the copier with nary a piece of paper for the next unsuspecting victim.

While you are technically correct in believing "it's not MY copier", a little consideration for the condition in which you leave the copier (or coffee pot, for that matter) will get you noticed as someone with initiative. As we discussed in our front page article, this means more recognition, which means more moola. And who knows—you may earn that promotion to the more exalted position of boss—and then **you** can pretend you don't know anything about copiers.

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Light Touches

Service Extras That Linger Long After the Experience

Have you ever been blown away by an employee who takes an incredible amount of initiative? We recently were, and were then surprised again!

We mailed letters to executives of several companies regarding The Extraordinary Leader conference we are hosting with Zenger | Folkman on May 19th and 20th. One such letter, addressed to the HR Director of **PacifiCare**, received a reply from a diligent administrative assistant named **Judy Beck**.

Judy actually wrote to us to inform us that her boss would soon be retiring, and that she didn't want us to waste any more time or postage in our calling efforts. We were very impressed—most people would have tossed the letter. But there's more! Our second letter to her boss went into the mail before we had a chance to remove it, so Judy ONCE

AGAIN followed through—this time with an email— to reiterate her boss's impending exit. So we emailed her back to thank her for her terrific attentiveness and told her she reminded us of another incredible assistant we worked with in our First Interstate days.

Low and behold, she forwarded our email of gratitude to her boss, who turned out to know us! She too, had once worked at First Interstate and had since remarried, which is why we didn't recognize her last name. This led to a series of emails and some renewed contacts.

Thanks to an extraordinary Judy Beck, our calling efforts had a very pleasant outcome. Since we often get a big dose of the marketing abyss, we were wowed. Thanks again, Judy!

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pArticle Piques

Irrksome iotas of service that cost : **Facial Follies**

We swear the staff have been coached to be visibly annoyed with each and every shopper in a particular Ralph's grocery store that we try not to frequent. Now let us tell you that there are other stores of the Ralph's/Kroger chain that are pleasant to patronize, but this one is feels more like a felony sentence than a trip to the market.

What is interesting is that this all changed when the former manager and a good number of his staff left or were transferred. The new regime must love misery, because it accompanies every bag of paper or plastic. Truly, plain rudeness would be a step UP.

It is not so much what they say, but the things their faces do that make us see red. A request for a stock item that can not be located is received with abject hostility. UGH! To have to leave the check stand or pick up the phone must be terribly onerous, because the giant exhale, followed by rolling eyes shows us that this is awful, indeed. You might think we're exaggerat-

ing, but it is true, give or take the degree of disdain, from one person there to another. Not the kind of consistency a business would want to have.

We would not be surprised if the workers there were told to practice "straight-lining" with their mouths, or that their training program involved the horizontal insertion of a drinking straw to keep the lips from an involuntary upward curve.

So yes, we're complaining about bad service in the extreme, and most businesses can honestly say that aside from one or two bad apples, they have great staff.

But surely you have heard of how one rotten banana can spoil the whole bunch? In this case, it is pretty clear that the top banana is ruining the whole heap, and everyone is emulating her. They're already losing business, and will lose more until things change. But the message is this...she probably hasn't changed much since before being a manager. Don't cultivate the bad seeds—weed em' out—preferably on a Monday or Tuesday.

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Warm Tips

Reheating some old principles to succeed in new times

Business Smarts

Chances are that you know a number of smart people at work. But what makes them so? That they say impressive things in meetings or presentations? The fact they've stayed below the radar when all Hell breaks loose? The assumption that they must be intelligent because they have giant bonus checks? Do they have the goods on some executive? Are they wonderful butt-kissers? Or could it be that they make great things happen?

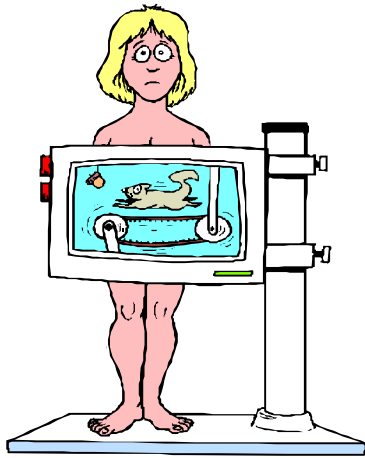
We got to thinking about how to define "smart" in people, and can find human examples for all of the above statements. But what stood out as most effective was the last one. While "Opinion Smart" has value, we think "Action Smart" has more. No new product or advance in technology occurred by people sitting around analyzing or opining. Instead, someone had to take action, and risk failure to reap the rewards of success.

Like the cases discussed on the first page, one small act by one person taking ownership or initiative could have averted financial calamity. Whether it is mentioning something observed or actually looking beneath what appears to be routine, taking an extra step can save miles of "duct-tape" fixes.

In the special supplement that accompanies this newsletter we have listed some ideas to consider for communicating quality—and they involve action to get beyond the Check The Box Mentality. And now you can also view our newsletters online at www.BusinessInsightsInc.com.

We think Grandma had a great way of expressing this: "Better to wear out than rust out."

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Insider Insights Thoughts and News Items We Felt Like Sharing



ATTENTION: SCAMS AND FRAUD

Upon receipt of an officious letter informing us of our need to comply with California Commercial Codes SEC 1500 and 9510 by submitting a check for \$125 to file our annual corporate meeting minutes, we got a hinky feeling. First, we went to the internet to research the sender, "Minutes and Compliance Affairs." We could not find a record of any such arm of the state government. We then noted that the postage, while metered, indicated that Minutes and Compliance Affairs had paid the full 37 cents—a sure tip off that something was amiss, because the government NEVER pays full freight for anything, right? Right.

We then talked to an attorney, who verified this solicitation as a scam. Needless to say, we didn't pay, but we did report it to the Better Business Bureau. (We tried to report it to the Secretary of the State, as

advised by our attorney, but their website had the navigational ease of a 3-legged mule in the Grand Canyon.)

What we did discover on the Better Business Bureau website was most interesting: a huge list of scams and frauds. Check it out at www.bbb.org. Click on "Tips" and you will be shocked to see all of the different schemes that exist to separate you from your money. The level of sophistication is impressive—and scary.

The BBB did get back to us to report that this company's business (that of bilking money by promising to do what we can do directly with the Secretary of State) is, in fact, legal. But it doesn't make it right. Help protect your family and friends from falling prey to what may be very convincing on the surface. This includes email offers as well. Remember, government agencies and big companies are also victims of Identity Theft—and their corporate names or official functions are frequently used to solicit information or money from hapless victims.

The bottom line is to resist giving the gift of ANYTHING personal—whether information, donations or fees to ANYBODY or ANY ENTITY without a thorough investigation. Even if you currently know them or do business with them, BE AWARE, and know that the older you become, the more appealing a target you are.

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Beacon Bits

Quotations to cast rays of humor and humanity across everyday business life

"Leadership is action, not position."
- Donald H. McGannon

"If you find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere."
- Frank A. Clark

"Measure your mind's height by the shade it casts."
- Robert Browning

"In achieving success, backbone is more important than wishbone."
- Frank Tyger

"When you stop learning, you're pretty much dead."
- Leslie F. Charlesworth

Last Laughs: Communication Degradation

MEMO FROM CEO TO GROUP HEAD: Today at 11:00 o'clock there will be a total eclipse of the sun. This is when the sun disappears behind the moon for 2 minutes. As this is something that cannot be seen every day, time will be allowed for employees to view the eclipse in the parking lot: have them report at 10 minutes before eleven. I will deliver a short speech and give some background information. Safety goggles will be made

available at a small cost.

MEMO FROM GROUP HEAD TO DEPT MGRS: Today at ten to eleven, all staff should meet in the car park. This will be followed by a total eclipse of the sun which will appear for two minutes. For a moderate cost, this will be made safe with goggles. The CEO will deliver a short speech beforehand and then give us some information. This is not something that can be seen every day.

MEMO FROM DEPT MGR TO FLOOR MGR: The CEO will today deliver a short speech to make the sun disappear for two minutes in the form of an eclipse. Report to the car park between ten and eleven. This will be safe, if

you pay a moderate cost.

MEMO FROM FLOOR MGR TO SUPERVISOR: Ten or eleven staff are to go to the car park where the CEO will eclipse the sun for two minutes. This doesn't happen every day. It will be safe, but it will cost you.

MEMO FROM SUPERVISOR TO STAFF: Some staff will go to the car park today to see the CEO disappear. It is a pity this doesn't happen every day.

