

August 2014

The Overloaded Manager-the future is at stake! What to do?

A question asked by many Chief Executive Officers, Managing Directors, General Managers and senior managers, more often than they care to admit. When all the talk is about work-life balance there seems to be an ever-increasing imbalance towards more work and less of the other stuff - life! More a typical scenario of leaders within small to medium size businesses however, not that uncommon in larger organisations. Managers within larger organisations may have the slight advantage of a greater pool of internal and external resources to tap into however, there will be quite a few who will disagree. It suffices to say that this is a very common problem which faces many managers - the higher up the ladder the more likely you will have a fluctuating workload - from high to very high to "how am I going to get through this" level!

Why does it happen? Why is the manager's situation so different to a person working in administration, finance, sales, engineering or the factory floor for that matter? Any excess workload in these areas are typically identified, scheduled in and suitably resourced; or turned away or referred to the manager for a decision. In most organisations, examples like this are very rarely turned away and from a manager or business owner's perspective will take precedence over their growing list of management projects. In the ideal world, a typical CEO, MD and GM's workload is made up of a list of well-defined management projects requiring planning and strategies with timelines and due dates. These are intermingled with planned meetings, client visits, presentations and an allowance of time to handle typical day-to-day issues. Unfortunately, the "ideal world" does not always happen. Extraordinary board requests, production emergencies, client complaints, personnel issues, WHS&E matters and other unplanned activity are the cause of the overload situation. The manager then gets caught in survival mode for the business and in many cases their own job, and their immediate concern is about ensuring the here-and-now are looked after. The planned management projects will either be delayed, indefinitely delayed or cancelled and unfortunately the future of the business at best is left in neutral or in many cases, not thought of again.

What to do about it? In the quiet of those rare but important planning periods, the management projects were identified as important for the future of the business. Therefore, they must be done. In some instances, postponing is OK, however, in most cases, indefinitely delaying or cancelling is suicide. The following is a step-by-step process on how you, the manager, can get over this impasse:

1. Complete a well thought-out business plan. This will flush out the important management projects.
2. Regularly review the business plan for relevance. Add or deduct from the list of management projects. Some may need changing.
3. As part of the business planning process, identify a timeline and responsibility team for completion of each of these projects.
4. Understand where you and the team's key strengths sit in the organisation. Are you a planner/strategist or more hands-on day-to-day type of manager?
5. Understand what the real world is like. It will have emergencies and other day-to-day interruptions. Can the unplanned be planned into the timeline?

6. Plan the necessary resources. Delegate? Additional full-time or part-time employees? Outsource to an external organisation? The budget and overall financial constraints of the business are key elements to also consider. The cost benefit analysis must consider a long term outlook and not only a short term view.
7. Experience indicates that sole reliance on delegation (i.e. use of existing internal resources) typically means delays, lack of focus, shortcuts, that is, a slow painful death to the project. Additional and dedicated resources is the most successful that is, via direct employees or outsourcing to an external specialist organisation.
8. If you go down the additional employee(s) route, ensure you identify the responsibilities of the role(s) and carefully recruit the talent to match. This takes time. The budget must support the additional employee(s) and for the long term, they must be fully productivity in their assigned roles.
9. The advantage of the external specialist are many. They will come in and understand your business, gain your trust and be ready to work with you as and when required. They then become your "go to" management resource when the workload demands it, turning them on and off as required.
10. Select the external resource wisely. They need to have the industry experience and technical capacity to understand your company and what it does. The one size fits all approach will not work. You must have absolute trust in their ability and service levels.

Whichever way you go, via delegation to an internal resource, additional employees or with an external specialist organisation, the decision to seek assistance is justified many times over. The manager's day-to-day responsibilities are paramount - they bring in the profits today, next week and next month and we all know that without profits there is no business, no company, and no employment for the dedicated employees. However, we also know (but circumstances prevent us from following through) that the future of the business, the company, the employment opportunities in 1 year, 2 years and beyond is very dependent on the diligent undertaking and completion of the identified management projects - the projects identified as critical to the future of the business. It comes down to understanding where the business is and where it wants to go and most importantly, the diligent planning and execution of the management projects. Other key components are the financial constraints and importantly, the work-life balance of the manager and his/her team. However, to do nothing and not to progress is not an option.