



By Larry Girouard

Many of my past articles talk about the challenges of change, but few business owners ever rise to the occasion and take on that challenge. For most company owners, maintaining a steady slow growth is good enough.

The Achilles Heel in this approach is that “steady slow growth” usually means growing with the market rather than implementing overt actions to penetrate the market. This works as long as the market is growing, but, as we all know, most markets ebb and flow.

The downside of any receding market trend is often a painful reality for owners as they face the difficult decision to lay employees off. On the emotional side, this is heart wrenching for the company and its owner. I know, because I have been on both sides of that equation.

Also, when you consider the overall investment to hire and train your employees on the culture of your business, having to let these people go presents the significant future cost of ramping up again.

If the strategy is to grow the business faster than market trends, owners are left with few options beyond market penetration. This means you must go out and take business away from competition. As stated so many times before, for market penetration to be successful you MUST be able to address the “Why?” question. The question that every target account will ask, which is “Why should I buy your product or service?” You must give them a real reason to believe that they will be better off with your company rather than staying with their current supplier. The devil you know.

OK, this seems logical.

That said, when a business owner sits down and begins to outline their message to address the “Why?” question, the page remains void of many compelling reasons. If you can’t get excited about your message, how do you ever expect your target accounts to be motivated to the point that they would consider jumping ship?

One thing that you can take to the bank is the fact that business owners/presidents cannot ever implement change on their own. Nor can they demand change through command and control techniques, because top down change programs often neglect the emotional needs of their employees. As a result, performance slowly and sometimes quickly, slips back to the old baseline levels. Referencing Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, it is suggested that employees be intimately involved and engaged with any change process.

The Beta Test Approach

I mentioned critical thinking in a past article, and the importance of owners being humble as the key ingredient for the glue that cements the foundation for making the change process possible and sustainable.

The tribal knowledge that most business owners have prevents them from letting go and empowering employees to make decisions because of the “no one understands the intricacies of my business better than I do” mentality. From that perspective, change will be incremental at best, and market penetration will remain on the wish list.

Every journey starts with the first step. Owners/presidents need to have the courage and humility to take the first step and see what happens. Construct a beta test that is

short term in duration (4-6 weeks), quantifiable, engages several employees, and if possible, crosses at least one functional line.

The scope of the beta test will be based on the risk that the owner is willing to take. It is best to start with a lower risk test and see what happens. Change is an acquired taste for both owners and their employees.

So, pick an area, or a process, that you feel needs to be improved, and see what the employees can do with it. You might consider:

1. Tapping the team of employees that you want to be involved in the program.
2. Have the team determine what the current state of the performance level is for the area. Some performance metrics may be available, while other descriptors would be more subjective in nature.
3. Have the team outline a timeline for key milestones for the project.
4. Allow them to meet on a regular basis to review their suggestions.
5. Allow them some latitude to make changes on their own so they can test their theisms.
6. Have them provide you with periodic updates on their progress through completion. They may ask for your suggestions, but I encourage you not to give too many. You do not want them to be over dependent on your input.
7. Compare the past performance in #2 above to the new performance and then brainstorm the pluses and minuses of the overall exercise.

The most important thing in this exercise is that team members must commit to each other that they will try to follow an overall established timeline of activities to completion. If they agree to that, than you, as president, must let them go and empower them to try new things to improve the designated area, or process chosen.

This approach is not complicated. The important thing to remember is to start with an area, or process, that is low risk initially. Then let go, and empower the team to come up with a better solution.

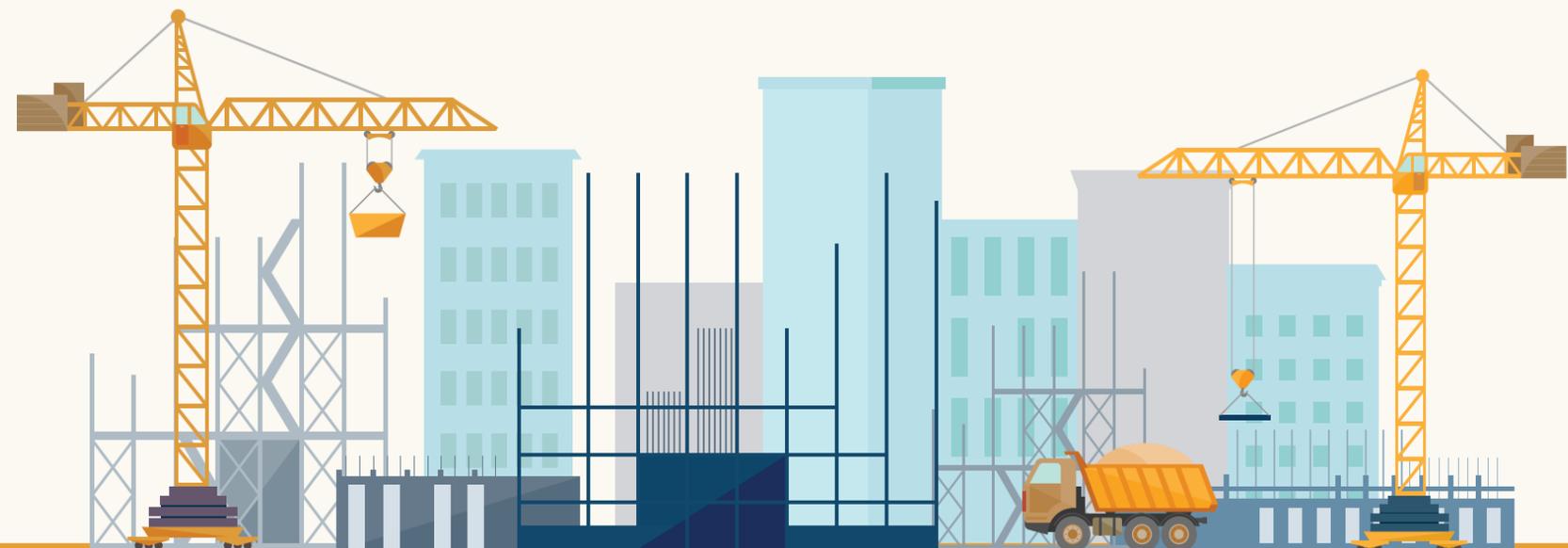
The team’s solution may not be optimum in your eyes, but that’s OK. This is all about getting employees involved with solving problems on their own. I am reminded of a statement that was credited to an employee of GE at a plant assembly with GE president Jack Welch. During Q&A an employee made a statement that, in part, went something like this:

“...you pay for my hands 365 days year, and you can have my mind for nothing...”

The thoughts and input of your employees about better ways to do their jobs is the single greatest untapped resource of an owner/president. Employees do what they do 40 hours a week. They know their job better than you will ever know it. Employees provide the gas that will run the “change engine.” Have the humility to listen to them, and trust that they will not let you down. I think you will be pleasantly surprised with the results.

So I ask:

**What Does The Change Process Look Like?
If you practice letting go, you will see.**



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