

Stop the Corporate Fire Engine - I Want to get OFF!

How to move from firefighting
to generating results you want.

The VP Sales closed her office door and sank into her chair. For the first time this year she had time to think and plan what she wanted to achieve over the next 12 months. She was looking forward to working on what she wanted to create, rather than frantically solving the many problems that came her way every day. As she smiled and picked up her pen she heard the dreaded sound. It was the corporate fire engine. The door burst open and there it was; the CEO at the wheel and her Senior VP clanging the bell. Other VP's were hanging off the back or running to catch up. "All aboard" shouted her boss, "fires have broken out in HR and Operations". They need our help." She responded immediately and as they sped out of her office she groaned: I wish I could stop this corporate fire engine and get off!

Two of the most important competencies of corporate leaders are the ability to think and to create results. That's why they are promoted and paid more money. And yet most spend their time solving problems and fighting fires. Problems do need to be solved, but if you spend most of your working life operating from a problem-solving orientation you are unlikely to generate the results you want.

This is because problem-solving is designed to remove problems, not create results. The motivation in problem-solving is to remove the problem. Once you take action the problem is lessened and so is the motivation to solve it. In addition, there are always many other problems clamoring for your attention and so off you go to attack the next one and so it goes. Further more, if you were successful at removing all the problems, all you would have would be an absence of problems.

There is a much better way to produce results – the creative process. The creative process is a different orientation, skill set and motivation. The creative process is future focused and strategic. The driving motivation when you are creating is the result. As you take action and make progress towards achieving the result you start to build momentum. The motivation increases as you move towards your goal and it becomes easier to take ever-bigger actions. This energy spills over into other projects.

The creative process has its own skills – describing the desired outcomes, accurately capturing current reality and building a learning feedback loop in your action plans. The fundamental skills are not hard to acquire and with practice anyone can harness the power of the creative process for their own projects.

The fundamental difference between problem-solving and creating is that with the former the problems are calling the shots and with creating you are organizing your time and resources to produce the results you want. This, of course, requires that you spend some time thinking about those results.

If I advise you to create time in your busy week to stop and think about the results you want to create you'll probably agree it's a great idea, but you won't do it. You won't do it because there will always be pressure to react and respond to the hundreds of problems coming across your desk. And let's face it. Being busy and solving problems makes us feel needed and useful; perhaps even important if the problems are big ones. And it's always easier to say yes than no when someone needs our help. It's easier to jump onto the fire engine than it is to get off.

So here's the dilemma: you are promoted to a job where you are paid to think and create results and yet the system pushes you to spend much of your time reacting to circumstances and solving problems. Thinking should be an important part of your job and yet if your assistant said you were unavailable because you were thinking, you'd probably lose credibility with the people who need you to solve their problems. And even if you could make time to think, you'd probably end up thinking about problems and how to solve them, rather than thinking about creating a different future with different results.

Given the forces in play that are causing you to stay in a problem-solving orientation, the only way out is to create a different structure in which to operate for at least part of your time. Here's how to do it:

- Find a 'thinking partner': preferably someone who is external to your organization; someone who will challenge your concepts and assumptions and help you

gain new insights and to think differently. This could be a mentor from another organization or a skilled executive coach.

- Book appointments to work with this person and keep them. You are much more likely to make time to think if you book an appointment to work with someone else. You are even more likely to honor the appointment if you are paying a good executive coach a lot of money to work with you.
- Mark it in your agenda as strategic planning or executive leadership coaching because others will understand and respect what you are doing and hopefully not try to eat into that time.
- Involve your team in this process at the earliest opportunity in order to benefit from their creativity as well as gain their commitment to whatever it is you want to create together.

The Corporate Fire Engine will continue to speed around your organization, making a lot of noise and putting out fires. Sometimes you need to be on it, but not all of the time. Rest assured, no one is going to stop the fire engine or even slow it down for you to get off. You have to choose to jump off occasionally by putting a different structure in place that gives you time to think and create the results you want. ■

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