

by Larry C. Smith



If It's Broke(n), **Fix It!**

Strategic planning and operations management are two principal roles that managers and administrators fulfill. And although the two require distinct skills, they do not occur independently. Successful managers know that **operations management should be designed to sustain the organization's broader strategic goals**. That success requires regular review of whether and how exactly operations do support strategy.



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As we contemplate how to prioritize our goals in any management or planning process, we sometimes divide our areas of emphasis into two broad categories. First, we focus attention on the most immediate and urgent, time-sensitive concerns. Then, before we can concentrate on remaining operations, new urgent concerns arise and divert our attention. As long as basic needs like electricity and payroll are met, we can be tempted to settle for the status quo in many areas of our ongoing operations. After all, as the old adage reminds us: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

What can be lost in that process, however, are at least two important points: the review of how already-successful operations may be improved further, and a real examination of the areas where your organization is falling short. The most effective management approaches include regular attention not only to improving what is working well, but also to identifying and correcting what is NOT working. This approach can best be described with five words: "If it's broke, fix it!"

In almost every area of your operations, there is an opportunity to "build a better mousetrap." To extend that analogy, adapting to changing circumstances may require simply adjusting the spring on that mousetrap, relocating it or even altering the amount of cheese used with it. But some of your mousetraps may be missing a spring altogether or otherwise missing the requisite strength to accomplish their tasks. Among the broken-mousetrap challenges that are common to many firms are systems, communications and (perhaps most importantly) people.

SYSTEMS

At some point, your firm developed systems and processes that fit the organization's needs at that time. They may have become even more detailed and complex over time. But how often have those systems and processes been revisited for currency? Were they developed to fit only one person's style? Have they been revised to fit changing circumstances and technology? Do they meet your current needs?

What's broken? One of the worst reasons for maintaining a process is because "We've always done it that way." If, upon review, you have learned that the existing approach is indeed the best approach, then by all means you should continue and strengthen that approach. But if there are no better reasons for maintaining the status quo than simply momentum or ennui, then fix it; move forward and develop an even better approach. Regular examination of systems and processes is essential to your ability to effectively meet your current and future needs. The costs – time, money and effort – of organizational change are often preferable to the costs of the organization's failure to adapt.

COMMUNICATIONS

It is easy (but lazy) to assume that a management team and the functional specialists in a firm are all in agreement and in support of the organization's strategic goals and that they understand those goals in the same way. But over time, each of us learns the dangers of making such assumptions. If individuals throughout the firm feel chained to their desks and communicate principally through e-mail (if at all), their efforts may become increasingly independent of common goals.



What's broken? How frequently do you discover that firm staff members or attorneys operate with their "own agendas," or are otherwise working at cross purposes? How often do you hear "that's not what I wanted," "that's not what I expected," "that's not what I meant" and similar telltale phrases?

The wasted time and additional work that result from such misunderstandings are not only drains on productivity, but also the firm's bottom line. Fix it: Hold face-to-face meetings with colleagues, including regularly scheduled project meetings and ad hoc check-in meetings. Communicate and agree upon expectations not only during strategic planning efforts, but also as you manage ongoing operations. And, as necessary, document those expectations and project plans in writing to all stakeholders.

PEOPLE

As author and consultant Jim Collins (*Good to Great*) and others have famously advised, organizations that go from good to great start not with "what" or "where," but with "who" is on the team. Having the right, self-motivated talent on the team allows an organization to better adapt to changing circumstances and remain focused on the overall strategy. With the wrong people in place, there will be many bumps in the road to success. Forming the best team requires both subtracting those people who do not contribute to the organization's goals, and adding new people who do.

What's broken? In some instances, a firm must face the reality that it has made some bad hiring decisions. But what about retention decisions? In many cases, whether through momentum or ennui, some members of the team simply have not successfully adapted to a changing environment over time and are no longer the contributors they once were. So, fix it: Either correct the unproductive behavior, or eliminate and replace people. With talented individuals whom you believe can make valuable contributions, challenge them to get on board within a specified period of time, and coach them to become valuable contributors. With those who lack the talent, skill, or motivation to fit in, management must move forward without them. It is rarely a pleasant task to eliminate a person or a position from your organization, but it is simply a task, not a shift in strategy. If that task supports a broader strategic goal, fix it, and add the right talent to your team.

Ultimately, as managers and administrators, our charge is to execute the strategies and tactics that support the organization's overall goals. Successfully meeting that challenge requires adapting to current circumstances, and relying on the status quo typically will not get the job done. By augmenting our efforts at reinforcing ongoing successes with regular attention to what simply is not working, we have much greater opportunities to ensure the organization's strategic success. If it's broke, fix it! ♦