

Local Business - Welcome new columnist Stephen Balzac



The Light's Better Here

By Stephen Balzac

There's an old joke about a man searching in the gutter under a streetlight. A passerby asks him what he's doing.

"Looking for my car keys," replies the man.

"Where did you drop them?" asks the passerby.

"Over there," says the man, pointing into the inky darkness down the street.

"Then why aren't you looking there?" responds the passerby in amazement.

"The light's better here."

Although ludicrous, like many jokes its humor comes, as it were, from the light it sheds on an important aspect of human behavior. Given the choice between poking around blindly in the dark or looking in the light, most people will choose the latter.

I can already hear the cries of, "But wait a second! That's nonsense. Why would anyone in their right mind deliberately look where they know the keys are not?"

Why indeed? The fact is, we already have our answer: "the light's better." The real question is what does that actually mean?

When working with businesses, I frequently encounter teams that spend months developing a solution only to discover that their solution, while possibly excellent, solves some other problem. Unfortunately, what it does not do is solve the problem they are actually dealing with. Why did the team choose that particular solution to implement? The reasons vary:

"It looked like it would be quick."

"It seemed logical."

"I once worked on a similar problem and that's what we did."

"It was the first suggestion we all liked."

"No one objected."

"We didn't understand the problem."

There are more, but to list all the variations on this theme would easily fill a book. Fundamentally, all of these responses boil down to, "the light's better here." In other words, the solution was chosen on the basis of simplifying the decision making process, not because it would actually work. In fact, only a cursory effort, if that, was made to analyze the solution and see if it would solve the problem. Indeed, frequently the initial examination and formulation of the problem was itself flawed. The end result is, like the man under the streetlight, wasted time and energy. At least our hero will probably find his car keys when the sun comes up. Assuming he doesn't get mugged, he's only risking a night's sleep. For a project team, depending on how much time they've wasted, the consequences can be much more significant: loss of momentum, revenue, market share, and possibly their competitive advantage.

So what is, then, the correct way to go about choosing which solution to implement?

The first step is to correctly understand the problem. In the immortal words of C. K. Chesterton, "It's not enough to know the solution. First you have to know the problem." Our friend with the car keys apparently believed the problem was figuring out how to search the street on a dark night; his solution was to find a lit area.

It can be helpful to look for as many different situations as possible in which the symptoms manifest. The symptoms are not the problem, of course, but they give you clues as to what the problem really is. A fever could mean you have Swine Flu, but, by itself, probably doesn't. You need to see what other symptoms are present. Once you have enough clues, then you can diagnose your problem with a reasonable chance of success.

Once you've formulated the correct problem, then you can start brainstorming solutions. The goal is not to take the first solution that sounds good, but to create a list of possible solutions. One of the worst things a team can do is be in such a rush that it lets ideas "plop" to the floor without considering them: the best idea often turns out to be a combination of several of the ideas that the team initially comes up with or is sparked by a discussion of a different idea.

Once the team has a list of possible solutions, it's time to evaluate them. That means projecting forward and imagining the solution in use. Will it actually work? Does it solve the problem? What criteria are you using to evaluate each solution? Are you using actual data or relying on opinions and guesswork?

If none of the proposed solutions survive evaluation, it's wise to revisit the problem formulation. Assuming that you have one or more solutions left at this point, though, your next step is to pick one and figure out how you'll implement it. It helps to seek the input of everyone who will be involved in the implementation process, to plan your implementation steps at a high level, and identify the early warning signs that your solution isn't going to work. Those signs may be hard to find or they may not yet be clear, but the sooner you can find them, the sooner you'll be able to course correct if you need to.

How are you identifying the problems your company needs to solve? How are you figuring out the solutions?

Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepsahead.com), an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses to increase revenue and build their client base. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.

Local Club Meetings/Notes

Ayer/Shirley Lions Club - General Meeting at the Nashoba Club Restaurant in Ayer on the 4th Monday each month. Social hour at 6pm/meeting 6:30pm. New members welcome.

Ayer/Shirley/Harvard/Devens Rotary Club meeting at the Bull Run Restaurant, Route 2A, Shirley, MA every Thursday at 6:00 p.m. For more info contact President Dave Swain at 978-425-4311.

Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club - The Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club meets on Thursdays at 12:15 at the Groton Country Club, Lovers Lane, Groton. Call Martha Campbell @ 978-448-1170.

Nashoba Valley Amateur Radio Club - meet on the third Thursday of each month, excepting July and August, at 7:30 PM at the Pepperell Community Center.

Pepperell VFW Ladies Auxiliary - 3rd Monday of the month at 6:30pm at the home post on Leighton St. Always looking for members, support and new ideas. email durno69@juno.com

Rotary Club of Lunenburg - Townsend - Mondays, except holidays, at the Bootlegger Restaurant, 50 Mass. Ave (route 2A) Lunenburg at 6:15pm. Call Jim Hays at 978-582-7235.

The Rebekah - Middlesex Lodge 176 - 1st and 3rd Tuesday each month at the Grange on Champney Street, Groton, Ma at 6:30 pm. We welcome everyone, you may contact: Natalie MacLeod @ 978-512-9738 or by email at sweetnatty58@hotmail.com

Townsend Lions Club - 1st Tuesday of the month at the Congregational Church meeting room 6:30p. Dinner meeting the 3rd Tuesday of the month at the Townsend House Restaurant at 6:30 pm. We welcome those interested in joining us.

Twin City Toastmasters: - Twin City Toastmasters meets every Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. at the Ronald M. Ansin Foundation Offices in downtown Leominster, MA. There is no fee for guests and you may attend as many times as you wish. For more info please call club president, Peter at (978) 227-0044.

Since its founding in 1924, Toastmasters International has helped four million men and women develop their public speaking skills and become confident communicators at work, at home, and yes, even at parties. Toastmasters now has approximately 200,000 members and 10,000 clubs in 90 countries. Twin City Toastmasters is one of more than 120 clubs in Massachusetts. www.twincitytoastmasters.com

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