

What Big Picture?

Stephen R Balzac

Imagine for a moment that you're sitting down in front of your brand new 72 inch flat screen TV. The picture is fantastic, and the room is huge, or at least good-sized. After all, if the room is too small, it'll be hard to sit far enough from the screen to really appreciate the picture. But, assuming that you have a little distance, the quality and the detail is just amazing. You can relax and see everything. Of course, if the show you're watching is really exciting, you may find that you've missed a few of those details while you focused on the main action. That's hardly unusual, and is a reason why people will often watch a movie more than once. Successive viewings allow them to pick up the little details that they might have missed the first, or even the second, time through.

Now, should you be sitting a little too close to that screen, it can be difficult to pick up some of the details. You can focus really well on the spot in front of you, but other parts of the screen can be hard to see. You might need to shift position or turn your head to follow the action. Even then, if the action gets too exciting, you may find it confusing or hard to follow. You might even find yourself getting caught up in the details that are right in front of your nose and ending up with a very confused perspective on what the entire show was all about.

At one time, I worked with a company that kept exhorting people to focus on the big picture. At the same time, they kept setting extremely aggressive goals with very tight deadlines. Everyone was pushing themselves to the limit trying to meet the deadlines. It was more than a little difficult for people to focus on anything other than the immediate problems they were trying to solve. It was kind of like sitting a bit too close to that 72 inch flat screen television and getting caught up in the exciting details right in front of you.



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At various meetings, it swiftly didn't become clear that no one really knew what the big picture was. The reason it didn't become clear was that at the first couple of meetings those who raised questions or attempted to find out what the big picture was were castigated for not paying more attention to that big picture. They were also chewed out for not focusing more on their areas of individual responsibility. People learned very rapidly to focus on their own areas and nod sagely in response to questions about the big picture. At least that way you'd only get chewed on over one thing.

The resulting product could be described charitably as a little schizophrenic. It was the equivalent of the blind men describing the elephant, with the added benefit of having a fifth blind man sitting nearby talking about the elephant's wings.

If you really want people to focus on the big picture, there are a few things that need to happen in order to make that possible.

First, silly though it may seem to mention this, you have to have a big picture. I can't count the number of organizations, for-profit and non-profit alike, where I've asked about overall vision and gotten nothing but static. A 72 inch television shows snow really well, so well that you might not even realize that you're looking at static. Take the time to delineate your vision.

Second, you need to make it easy for people to see the big picture. The company I mentioned earlier was trying to make it hard for people to ignore the big picture. Unfortunately, the harder they made it to ignore the big picture, the harder they made it to see the big picture. There's a reason why people see movies more than once:

when we're excited or stressed we miss the details that are not in front of us. Unfortunately, most businesses don't get instant replays. Therefore, we need to reduce the stress level if we want people to pay attention to things that are not of immediate concern.

Third, distance makes a big difference. When we're too close to the problem, it's hard to see anything

beyond it. Just like sitting too close to that 72 inch TV, we forget about things not in our immediate field of vision. If you want people to focus on the big picture, you need to create some metaphorical space so that they can take it in. That requires taking the team away

from the daily routine to periodically review the big picture. Help each person see why their piece is important and how it fits in. Connect the dots. Give people perspective.

Finally, encourage questions and give honest answers. That includes admitting when you don't know. Don't yell at people for not seeing the big picture; instead, view it as feedback that either the big picture isn't being communicated well or isn't

clear. Invite feedback and encourage people to contribute to fleshing out the picture. It's a lot easier to focus on the big picture when you feel involved.

It's amazing how much better the picture is when you give yourself the space to enjoy it.

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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 get unstuck and transform problems into opportunities. Steve is a contributing author to volume one of "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play." Steve's book, "[The 36-Hour Course on Organizational Development](#)," published by McGraw-Hill, is available at Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and other book stores. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.