



The Effective Organization

October 2008

Roof Never Leaks When It Doesn't Rain

"Get along," said he, "for you give me a pain;

My cabin never leaks when it doesn't rain."

– Arkansas Traveler

If you watched the Olympics last summer, you may have seen women's gymnastics. Under the intense pressure of competition, they made several mistakes. The team took silver when they could have taken gold.

This is not an unusual occurrence in sports. During practice, an athlete may demonstrate a fantastic level of skill, only to fall apart in competition. In judo training, a student may excel at a technique, only to crash and burn during a black belt exam.

Indeed, choking under pressure is hardly limited to sports. Many people have stood up to give a presentation and forgotten what they intended to say. Sadly, in the business world, it is also hardly unusual for team members to start bickering and fighting with one another when things get tense. Under the pressure of a tight deadline or a critical milestone, all manner of nastiness and finger-pointing may emerge.

In sports, when an athlete, or a team, chokes under pressure,

that's anything from a danger signal to the loss of a gold medal. So what does a coach do when an athlete is having trouble performing under pressure? They each work to fix the situation. Perhaps the athlete needs more training, or he/she needs to develop skills to handle the pressure. Perhaps the team needs to build unity and team spirit. A good coach identifies what is wrong and develops a training plan so that it won't happen again.

How about business? Just as in a sport, a team that does not perform well under pressure or a manager who fails to manage effectively when most needed is a danger signal. The problem doesn't go away when the pressure abates: when the sun is shining, it's merely that the roof doesn't leak.

Why not assume the problem will just go away on its own? Mainly because that's not what typically happens. In fact, a problem tends to get worse the more often the team snatches defeat from the very jaws of victory. As the pressure mounts, the team cracks all the more. Why not fix the problem right then and there? Well, as the Arkansas Traveler says, "I couldn't mend it now; it's a rainy day." Whether in sports or

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Publications

Throwing Sand in the Gears at ByThePeople.org.

business, the best time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining.

Simply put, under stress is not the time to fix a major problem. When time is short and the stakes are high, people are not receptive to changes. The attempt to introduce new skills or new procedures is likely to only make the situation worse. Skills and procedures need to be learned and practiced under calm conditions before being applied in stressful conditions.

Unlike sports, however, corporate executives at all levels frequently fail to take advantage of those sunny days. They ignore the danger signals. Once the rain stops, they no longer feel any urgency to fix the roof. After all,

the milestone was met; the product did get out the door. While the athletic team may have just lost the medal, the business will claim victory, or at least some measure of success. In fact, they simply haven't realized that they've lost. By the time management recognizes that the competition has overtaken the company, it's often too late: the storm has already started. There's neither time nor resources to fix the roof when everyone is frantically scrambling to meet the competitive threat.

Of course, occasionally it really is a one-off incident. So how do you determine that there is a problem that needs to be fixed?

- Take notes on the behavior you are seeing. Record what happened and under what conditions.
- When things calm down, review your notes. Ask yourself if the observed behavior is something you want to risk again. If you feel the level of risk not

worth worrying about, stop now.

- Otherwise, observe how people behave in other situations. Do you see the behavior reappearing whenever a tense or difficult situation arises? Do you see team members being overly polite or consciously avoiding difficult questions?

If the answer to either question is "yes," then you have a hole in the roof.

*The traveler replied, "That's all quite true,
But this, I think, is the thing to do;
Get busy on a day that is fair and bright,
Then patch the old roof till it's good and tight."
But the old man kept on a-playing
at his reel,
And tapped the ground with his leathery heel.
"Get along," said he, "for you give me a pain;
My cabin never leaks when it doesn't rain."*

About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is the president of 7 Steps Ahead, a consulting firm specializing in increasing individual, team, and organizational performance.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology at Wentworth Institute of Technology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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