

Article lead

Are you an expert at whack-a-mole decision making?

Most leaders and their teams **are** transactionally handicapped! They unintentionally are ill prepared to understand and effectively resolve the increasing number of complex business problems they face on a daily basis. Most leaders try very hard to resolve business problems/opportunities, and the reality is that most of the time they are engaging in *whack-a-mole decision-making*.

With determination they are whacking away at what they think is the problem, unfortunately their efforts and disproportionate rework are aimed at the symptom and not the system that generates the symptoms. It has nothing to do with a leader’s intentions, nor with their experience or intelligence. It has everything to do with the way we as leaders have been taught to think about and resolve problems.

For example think about the problem of poor communications between departments. This is an all too common problem that decision makers try to solve through memos and workshops on effective communications. When that does not work, we institute a set of policies and procedures or worse yet; we hold a series of meetings and in effect blame people for not communicating. Yet poor communications is a symptom, not a problem unto itself.

Seldom do we take the time to understand and ask the systemic questions. What are the variables or factors that make interdepartmental communications so difficult? Assuming folks want to communicate effectively with one another, what gets in their way? What communication efforts get rewarded and what efforts get reinforced? Figure out the system and you will develop the systemic insight necessary to make meaningful systemic changes, systemic changes that DO result in improved interdepartmental communications.

A system is a set of factors or variables that dynamically interact and as a result they produce symptomatic outcomes, events or tip of the iceberg type problems

Most of the so called business problems we face are actual symptoms that are generated by a complex and dynamic system. Think about an iceberg. We know that 85% or more of any iceberg is below the surface and what we can see or the tip of the iceberg is only a small sample of how big the iceberg really is. The visible part of the iceberg that is above the surface is a symptom. The real challenge or problem with the iceberg is just below the surface. We all know that what was below the surface sunk the Titanic and the visible tip of the iceberg was only a symptom of the real problem just below the surface. Unfortunately most leaders focus on the visible tip of the iceberg, the events or symptoms rather than the real or systemic causes of the problem/opportunity. By focusing on the symptom, the tip of the iceberg above the surface, they become transactionally handicapped and often, unintentionally make things worse.



85 to 90% of an iceberg is “below the surface” and that what is below the surface controls the “behavior” of the iceberg above the surface

We have become very good at confusing the symptom of a problem with the real or systemic causes of a problem. As transactionally handicapped leaders we find ourselves in a vicious loop of firefighting, rework, blame and **whack-a-mole decision making**.

How often have you heard a business leader say *WHO caused the problem? HOW did it happen? WHAT are we going to do to make sure it will never happen again?* For most leaders these are “auto-pilot” reactions. They are asking questions in reaction to the event or symptom rather than asking questions to explore and understand the systemic or root causes (plural) of the problem or opportunity. Often the unspoken message is *let’s hurry up ... fix it and move on to the next problem event*. This is whack-a-mole decision making at its finest. We all know that event oriented problem solving results in ineffective solutions that actually have little if any impact on the real or systemic problem. I believe that is why we are so often in firefighting mode and engaged in so much rework.

Unfortunately, as leaders we have learned that our colleagues and direct reports expect us to take action, make quick decisions, fix things and move on to the next problem. We have developed the nasty habit of trying to solve complex business problems before we even take the time to understand the system behind the symptoms. Instead of trying to uncover the dynamics and complex system that is generating the symptom, we focus on the tip of the iceberg.

The predictable but unintended consequence of buying into this *hurry-up-and-do-something* expectation is that many leaders make decisions that do not change the system and only temporarily mask the symptoms (think of the game whack-a mole). It is common sense really. We as leaders, and by extension the teams we lead, have never learned how to deal effectively with systemic complexity. How much systems thinking training and experience have you had in identifying, describing and leveraging complex, dynamic business problems? I know, *we don’t have time to learn how to make effective systemic decisions because we are too busy putting out fires*. We are transactionally handicapped leaders because we are educated and trained that way. We have not learned how to quickly identify and understand the systems that create the symptoms.

Think of the complex problems you face day-in and day-out. How many of your “fixes” are based on a real or systemic understanding of what is causing the symptoms? Or, are you engaged in a never ending game of whack-a-mole?

Sometimes resolving a problem by focusing on the root cause is very appropriate and effective if the problem has a simple or linear cause and effect relationship. Auto-pilot problem solving can be very appropriate in situations where you can control the variables or where there truly is one root cause of the problem.

For example, if an assembly line machine breaks down, hurry up and fix the machine is the response of most leaders. We simultaneously also engage in blame frame questions like *who broke the machine? How long before we are back on line running?* But what if the machine broke down because the maintenance group does not believe that regular preventative

maintenance is important? Fixing the machine will not address the more complex problem involving the attitude and behavior of the maintenance group.

Fixing the machine is easy, transactional and necessary. But it does not change the systemic cause which is the attitude of the maintenance group. So, by being transactional we end up with a pattern of broken machines, quick fixes and lots of expensive re-work ... doing it over and over again.

As a transactional decision maker you seldom actually resolve the systemic causes that create the event or symptoms. Unintentionally, we as leaders do not resolve the real or systemic issue, instead we implement transactional decisions/fixes. These auto-pilot fixes often make things worse or even create new problems.

Let's face it, most leaders do not face simple cause and effect problems. The people we work with are smart and very capable of fixing simple cause and effect day-to-day problems. It is the really complex business problems that most often face senior leaders. In most organizations the simple day to day problems are easily resolved by front line staff and middle managers. Senior leaders and managers are faced with increasingly systemic complex business problems/opportunities such as,

- sustainable high customer service
- consistent product and service quality
- employee morale and productivity
- cross departmental collaboration,
- product or value added service pricing,
- effective internal and external communications,
- innovation and entrepreneurship ... and the list goes on and on.

These are the type of complex no easy answer problems that require systemic decision making skills, not auto-pilot quick fixes. These are problems that are embedded with intended and unintended consequences, have critical time delays and unfortunately are often not new. These systemic problems and opportunities are faced by leaders every day.

Are you a Transactionally Handicapped *whack-a-mole* Leader?

The good news is that we are not eternally doomed to being transactional handicapped decision makers. We have very effective hands-on real work programs to teach leaders how to think systemically and act strategically. We know how to replace whack-a-mole decision making with much more effective and efficient systemic problem solving. All it takes is a willingness to learn and become less transactional. If you would like more information or want to chat about learning and implementing more systemic decision making skills, please contact us. Our practical and pragmatic 2 to 3 day leadership seminar "Resolving Complex Business Problems" has helped many leaders like YOU overcome *whack-a-mole decision making*?

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