

Some Tips & Tactics for Tackling Tough Business Issues

Introduction

Humor can often deliver insights in ways that people will find more palatable and, therefore, be more open to learning from. So I joined forces with Howard Moskowitz and 50 other contributors to “lance the boil” by creating diabolical definitions that satirize some of the fundamental problems that plague the business world. Entertaining readers is all fine and good, and hopefully *Blah, Blah, Blah: A Snarky Guide to Office Lingo* accomplishes that goal!

At the same time, however, the greater purpose of satire is to urge reforms. *How might the business world, and in particular the workplace function more successfully* is the question I’m pursuing here. On a chapter-by-chapter basis, let me offer a few suggestions for how progress might be made. The tone of this content is much more earnest than *Blah, Blah, Blah*, but ideally in seeking to be practical it doesn’t become too Pollyannaish in nature. Change is difficult, and I don’t want to pretend that a few tips and tactics can change the game overnight. Nevertheless, if you don’t try you surely won’t succeed.

Please note: What you are about to read is meant as a small, additional benefit for people who have purchased *Blah, Blah, Blah*. To go more in depth and draw on case studies and other learnings from my 20+ years as a unique market researcher and now from my interviews of authors for my podcast “Dan Hill’s EQ Spotlight” on the New Books Network (NBN), feel free to contact me for possible speeches, workshops and consulting advice at dhill@sensorylogic.com – thank you. You and your company can get any of those outcomes started by scheduling a free 15-minute call with me.

Most of the Tips & Tactics to follow include both suggestions that could be enacted on a company-wide or department level, typically by managers, as well as suggestions that you can implement on your own as an employee.

Chapter 1: (bamboozled by) Your Own Foibles

THE HIRING PROCESS

The challenge: Corporate chaos mixed with people longing to get hired is rarely a pretty combination. Resume fraud costs companies over \$600 billion annually because of cycling through liars, while over 60% of workers say their job duties are at odds with expectations set during the hiring process. In short, there's disappointment with the hiring process all around. How might things be improved on?

A few Tips & Tactics:

- Companies should require work samples that will be discussed in-depth. (Applicants, don't try faking your way through the process.) Moreover, two to three people, minimum, should sit in on the job interviews to gauge against one person's biases sealing the wrong deal.
- As an applicant, get a feel for both the company culture and the management style of the people you will be working with and for. Do so by asking how the handling of past complaints may have led to improvements within the department you seek to join. Is employee input welcome?

ON-BOARDING, TRAINING, AND ON-GOING LEARNING

The challenge: The orientation process is often haphazard at best. Now the problem of settling into a good job with a future is even more at risk. It's estimated that 25% of U.S. jobs are highly vulnerable to automation, which isn't surprising given that 70% of U.S. workers are in jobs that require little to no originality. How to build careers as opposed to a series of dead-end jobs?

A few Tips & Tactics:

- Companies should create a three-person orientation team that includes not just the hiring manager; also include another newbie and a department veteran to offer perspective. This three-person team should huddle with the new employee on an as-needed basis as well at both the 50- and 100-day point of the new hire joining the company to provide feedback and offer guidance. Also, on day one the new hire's manager should provide a "user's guide" on how things *really* work, pet peeves and all.
- To improve your odds as a new employee, focus on both *what* you will need to know and *who* you can know and learn from. Build up your transferrable skills and find some mentors. Address problems nobody else is handling offers a path forward. In doing so, don't alienate status-quo oriented colleagues by proposing changes; offer "experiments" instead.

Chapter 2: (bamboozled by) Your Manager's Blind Spots

ENGAGEMENT & PRODUCTIVITY

The challenge: Surveys indicate that as few as 16% of employees are “fully engaged” by their work. Productivity and retention suffer accordingly. Cynicism arises from employees (as many as 75% of them in large companies) who believe that political skills matter more than talent and hard work.

A few Tips & Tactics:

- Managers should consider assigning each employee on their staffs a portfolio of projects. Even better, give the staff plenty of opportunity to input on and perhaps even largely shape their portfolios themselves. Together, the manager and staff member should search for metrics to evaluate the employee's output fairly so that future performance reviews are valid.
- As an employee transformed into an in-house “intrapreneur,” aim for a process as transparent as possible. Can hacker leader boards track progress on your portfolio via followers and likes? Can ideas be debated in front of colleagues, with your department members voting on what will work best or even “invest” in outcomes as a way to pilot innovations?

PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

The challenge: Workplace anxiety is rampant. When tied to stress, the annual cost to companies in America due to lost productivity, errors, and healthcare costs is believed to be \$300 billion annually. Ironically, around 90% of employees likewise feel anxiety about the prospect of talking about their anxiety with their boss, a figure equal to the percentage of managers afraid to give constructive feedback because they fear employees may react badly to any helpful hints they offer.

A few Tips & Tactics:

- The occasional, annual performance review is hardly enough to reduce anxiety and give employees more guidance and assurance. What could be done differently? Casual, 20-minute coffee break chats could inspire more chemistry between managers and their staff members. Furthermore, consider ditching the annual review in favor of quarterly reviews and occasional “gratitude” meals with work teams. Most of all, consider separating any discussion about a raise from improvement opportunities because the money factor will overshadow everything else, meaning no suggested improvements will get noticed and have a chance to stick.

Chapter 3: (bamboozled by) Colleagues Stirring the Pot

ASSIGNING & MONITORING TEAMS

The challenge: Over 80% of workers say they do most of their work in teams. At the same time, one study found that only 69% of business projects meet their original goals and only 52% of those projects are completed on time. Something needs to give but what *exactly*?

A few Tips & Tactics:

- In many and perhaps even most cases, managers should make team sizes smaller, hence more accountability, by limiting them to six members. Never exceed a team that could be fed by a pair of large pizzas! Another suggestion is to diversify every team by gender, race, age, expertise—and personality type—to gain more perspective. To give the team teeth, consider making part of the annual compensation tied to team performance.
- As an employee, why not submit a 90-second video of why you want to be on the team and what you hope to contribute? In other words, audition for a role you want. After all, what's the point of staffing teams with people who don't share a passion for making progress on an initiative? The cancer of indifference helps no one.

MEETINGS

The challenge: A survey of senior managers found that two-thirds of them denounce meetings as too often being inefficient and unproductive. In other words, most meetings are the equivalent of missed opportunities to solve issues and accomplish some deep, collaborative thinking. Add up all the hours devoured by pointless meetings, and you've got the makings of a productivity death spiral.

A few Tips & Tactics:

- Assemble in advance of every meeting the three best questions or goals among those submitted by those who will be in attendance. During the meeting, monitor who's talking and who can't seem to get a word in edgewise to ensure all voices are heard. Afterwards, assess what changed and was accomplished as a result of the meeting to build momentum and enact whatever course adjustments might be advisable.
- Based on the meeting's agenda and later on how the meeting actually went, prove yourself to be a value-add employee by contemplating what's missing, problematic or simply confusing about the discussion you are or were part of. Without making a nuisance of yourself, observe and suggest ways to fix any "holes" so that the meeting realizes its potential. After the fact is better than nothing; but if you can do so in real-time, during the meeting, all the more power to you!

Chapter 4: (bamboozled by) Executive Blunders

INNOVATION

The challenge: One survey found that over 60% of respondents say it's "very difficult" for frontline employees to try something new. Another survey found that only 9% of non-managerial employees strongly agreed that they're free to take risk to improve the company's products or services. What a sad state of affairs at a time when the companies listed in the Fortune 500 are turning over at a rate three times greater than was true a few decades ago. What's possible so that innovation can boost the odds of a company's viability?

A few Tips & Tactics:

- Companies can foster change and growth by creating the role of Chief Learning Officer. At the departmental level, use a wider lens in brainstorming idea. Incorporate analysis by coming up with solutions that may involve identifying (hidden) stakeholders, ingrained assumptions, and where in the company the problem in question doesn't exist, and why that's so. Maybe a solution is already lurking somewhere else within the company!
- On an individual basis, employees can modify unproductive behaviors by changing their habits. To do so, figure out the goal and the motivations that could help inspire change. Then identify the triggering events that can serve to prompt new behaviors.

INCLUSIVENESS

The challenge: A survey found that only 36% of business professionals today believe their companies foster an inclusive culture. Even worse, nearly 40% of women report experiencing sexual harassment on the job. In contrast, nearly 80% of their male counterparts don't see anything problematic going on at all. It's hard to fix what half your workforce can't or won't recognize as harmful, dispiriting conduct.

A few Tips & Tactics:

- Executives set the standard for empathy. How to ensure a high standard? Levers like having their compensation and career advancement being linked to progress would certainly get their attention. One set of clear-cut metrics to start with could involve recruiting and retaining women and minorities in the departments they control.
- On an individual basis, ways for executives to heighten their own sensitivity could range from volunteering at a food bank to attending a Hispanic or African-American church service. In short, anything that will help put them in somebody else's "shoes" is a good start. Something more experiential will have more impact than listening to another diversity lecture.

Chapter 5: (bamboozled by) Other Buffoons

ENTREPRENEURS

The challenge: Merely 18% of first-time entrepreneurs will succeed, and for second-time entrepreneurs the rate is only slightly better at 20%. Given that your average entrepreneur is six times more likely to be ADD, and that an entrepreneur is also more likely to have Asperger's syndrome, realize that social skills may be limited. So a good idea and capital aside, the more humanistic aspects of being an entrepreneur may be tough when it comes to pitching well, handling client accounts, and building a sustainable staff.

A few Tips & Tactics:

- If you're a venture capitalist, place a premium on just how well the founder(s) take advice. A good place to start might be by asking, "What's your return on mistakes?" (ROM). The same is true if you're the mentor for an intrapreneur operating with a large company's structure.
- If you're the entrepreneur, you may need to get out of your own head in a big way. Means for doing so may include: focusing on how to get rid of yourself (meaning your plans don't make your company overly dependent on your presence) and talking to would-be customers to learn how much they would value your offer and what adjustments to make to optimize value.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

The challenge: From R & D to marketing to the customer service department, companies always run the risk of suffering from myopia. Customers become an abstraction, somewhere out there beyond HQ. Nor will the market researchers be of much help if their methods are overly rational in orientation. After all, people don't think their feelings, they feel them; and those feelings drive motivations and behavior as well as dictate what's memorable. You surely can't build loyalty based on disappointing people repeatedly just in order to curtail your operating costs.

A few Tips & Tactics:

In offer development (R & D) or marketing, look to motivations and which of the basic five senses can best be leveraged. Map every step of how customers will experience the product. Can you gain an edge with a unique texture, flavor or smell? In your marketing efforts, try to instill pride of ownership through a sense of belonging to an "in" group.

- As a case study, learn from Tesla's approach. Their market/sell/build and market (yet again) model upends the traditional build/market/sell sequence. Customers are turned into advocates who help fund designs they input on from start to finish. A cause (getting the world off fossil fuels) provides a sense of purpose beyond profit-making alone.