

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Attack Complacency, Then Your Competition; A sense of crisis without chaotic frenzy can elevate employee resolve to fix problems.

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How many times do you watch a sporting event and comment to yourself, "The better team didn't win," or, "They really beat themselves"? While it is easy to detect it when it happens to someone else, the same thing happens frequently enough in print businesses. Is your firm losing by beating itself? How do you move the focus to what will make your firm succeed?

In my years in print operations, I frequently found myself tempted to react to competitors' activities. Customers fresh from a tour of another facility would comment on print processes they'd seen elsewhere, or on some new quality focus that had impressed them. Inevitably, my team and I would fall into the trap of comparing our operation to the perceptions of someone else's that the customers had described.

It certainly makes sense to respond competitively and address those customer perceptions. The key is to turn it into a productive opportunity by working within the context of your organization's own strengths and competencies. Management should not lose internal focus just to respond to what often play out to be transitory, even illusory external challenges. Attacking complacency, the antithesis of focused execution, is a much better target for keeping your organization from beating itself.

So what creates complacency, and how do you combat it? There is a litany of sources for it, but most boil down to these three:

Lack of perceived crisis in the organization. A culture that fosters complacency. Metrics measuring the wrong things.

Last month's column touched on the importance of metrics that span the organization and focus on process improvements, not just results. In future columns we'll speak to organizational culture issues. But this month, we'll address how to raise a sense of urgency and create the sense of crisis that provides the energy needed to combat

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complacency in your printing organization.

No chaos required

Creating a sense of crisis doesn't mean you throw your business into a chaotic frenzy. It does mean you elevate employee awareness of, sensitivity to, and desire for resolving business problems. The process begins with clearly identifying and communicating what these are. In my own experiences, I typically found the problems that seemed the most insurmountable were the ones I was trying to solve by myself. Once employees were engaged in the issue at hand, progress was visible and rapid.

Remember, communications with the customer are not the private domain of management. Employees are usually more than willing to do what it takes to please a client. Too often, though, they are sheltered from direct customer contact. Finding ways to get your customers and employees talking about process improvement helps create the focus and energy needed to develop the sense of crisis and to generate the motivation you're looking for.

A range of simple routines can have a big impact. Invite clients to do a live press check in your facility. Send production personnel to the customer to discuss past issues or plan for future jobs.

A sense of urgency frequently emerges naturally from honest communication around what problems exist and need to be solved. When a customer tours your plant, does management always lead the tour? Why not delegate the role to the employees in each area, so they can discuss their work? Involving employees directly engages their efforts and energizes the organization. This will inject motivation in your employees to positively impact the customer experience. And it will make your facility the one your customers become impressed with.

Focused, employee-driven execution of what you do best keeps complacency at bay-and keeps your organization from ever beating itself.

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