

WHEN LESS IS MORE

Recently surfacing for air after a particularly busy few months, I was reminded how easy it is to lapse into the 'do as I say, not as I do' school of management.

I have 20 years' experience in learning and development, but I'm no more infallible than the next person when, for example, it comes to lapsing into poor communications habits. We're human, after all.

Because each of us is a work in progress, even well-learned methods of measure and control can sometimes dissolve when the pressure is on. At such times, I ponder the saying 'less is more' and employ it as a moment to stop, breathe and think before normal service resumes. We juggle so many balls that sometimes we need to take a step back and remember that one less ball might well result in one more task being achieved.

Of course, on an individual basis, it is easy to forgive the quirks and traits that can emerge when the pressure of business quickens the pulse. But in a company made up of hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals, these quirks are magnified, with large-scale implications. And the 'less is more' rule that works so well for individuals often gets inverted in an organisational culture that



Big business is prone to taking the 'more is less' approach but, says **Lyn Bicker**, stepping back and taking a breather often yields better results

encourages a 'more is less' approach.

Companies need to learn how to take a deep breath and a big step back in order to plan measured steps forward. Easy on an individual level, but how do you get big businesses, with their cumbersome corporate structures, to pause for thought?

Organisational coaching is one way. The aim is the same as individual or executive coaching – to encourage clients along their developmental path. It worked at one company I was with recently. Coaching helped a top team stop, breathe and think before collectively moving forward at slightly different individual paces, and with all eyes firmly fixed on the same business goals and the same timelines.

The clients: a new operations boss with a new team of top executives at a large transport network. The challenge: quick and tangible improvements in operations performance. The opportunity: reverse the 'more is less' approach. This meant taking the time to step back, really look at how things were done and, for example, to recognise that while one management level was focused on operational performance today, another was focused on operational performance today and tomorrow.

The boss took two key steps. First, service delivery plans, seen as cumbersome tomes gathering dust on the shelf, were transformed into just a few clear objectives – for

example, one was to make an explicit link between operational excellence and customer service. Second, to ensure the management team concentrated as a unit on achieving these clarified corporate goals, it entered into an organisational coaching programme.

COACH COMPANY

The approach moulded a consistent management style that fixed on the changes the organisation wanted to make. Rather than using coaching to work on individual development and success, organisational coaching captured and embedded learning from individual coaching to focus on business, not personal, issues.

Each management executive and their coach focused on what needed to happen, immediately and regularly, in order to achieve each operational goal. Identifying key steps was the most important outcome of coaching sessions – checking back to understand what worked and what could still be improved was a crucial part of meetings between coach and client.

A year later the success of the organisational coaching programme has been measured in different ways. Attention to poor performance has been increased, service delivery plans are perceived as 'real' and managers report improved relationships and communication with their people.

It is simplistic, of course, to apply 'less is more' to every challenging situation. I've seen the passionate and impulsive among us find it hard to adopt this as a constant pace at which to work. These people thrive on the peaks and troughs of business buzz and for them less is, well, just less. On the other hand, their opposites are comforted by a deliberate approach to life at home as well as at work. Not everyone reacts well to surprises. As for me, I see another whirlwind on the horizon. ■

LYN BICKER is a former senior HR executive. In 1999 she founded TSO Consulting, specialising in management and organisational development. For more information go to: www.tsoconsulting.co.uk

