October 2009
The Pain

The Pain

Poor Charley

Charley woke up that morning like any other. He rolled out of bed and then it hit him. Zap. A sharp pain in his side. Ouch, Charley thought, I need to get this fixed as soon as possible.

Charley was a smart guy, and a self made man. He dove right in and starting researching what would cause a pain like this in his side. Bingo, he realized, it is my appendix. Charley booked an appointment with a surgeon and had his appendix removed. The surgery went well and Charley felt better. When he tried to get out of bed however, the pain returned in full force.

Charley dove back in and did more research. Got it, he exclaimed, it has to be my gall bladder. Charley called and booked an appointment with another surgeon to have his gall bladder removed to eliminate the pain once and for all. Again, the surgery went very smoothly. But again the pain returned.

Of course the above story is fictional. No surgeon in his right mind would operate on a patient, let alone remove an organ, based on a simple phone call and a description of a symptom…a pain in my side.

But amazingly this happens every day in the business world. A business owner or manager wakes up one morning and realizes his business is in pain. Because he is smart and more than a bit independent minded he self diagnoses the problem and calls in an expert to treat the specific condition he self diagnosed. As the saying goes "to a hammer everything looks like a nail" so the well meaning consultant dives in to help. Often the result, like in poor Charley's case above, is that a lot of money and precious time is lost but the pain remains.

So is there a better way? Let's revisit poor Charley and see.

The Doctor's Visit

Charley wakes up in the morning with a sharp pain in his side. Ouch, this hurts badly. I need to get this fixed as soon as possible because I have lots to do and cannot afford to lose any time being distracted with this. Charley calls his doctor, a wise general practitioner (GP), and books an appointment for that afternoon. During the appointment the GP asks Charley lots of questions, especially about what and how he eats. He examines Charley. He orders an X-ray of Charley's side and some blood work. The next day Charley's doctor calls him and tells him that the diagnosis of his pain is cramping caused by eating too much processed food especially late at night. He sends Charley an instruction sheet on how to correct his diet and a prescription to help with the pain in the mean time. Within a week the pain is gone for good and Charley has more energy and feels better than he has in years. If the diagnosis was different and surgery was required Charley's GP could have referred him to the appropriate specialist, but this turned out to be unnecessary.

Obviously, the above example was made a bit extreme to illustrate the point. What is not extreme is the amount of money, lost time, and in some cases damage that I see companies experience by skipping the all important diagnosis step.

The Key Step – The Diagnosis

So what key attributes does an advisor have that allows him to accurately diagnose the root cause of a company's pain?

• Objectivity – It is extremely difficult to accurately diagnose the root cause of an issue if you are not completely objective. What if Charley was sensitive about his weight and his eating habits? Do you think this might affect his ability to diagnose his pain as related to eating? What if a business owner or manager considers himself an innovative product developer? Do you think he could objectively assess his company's

challenges in this area? What if he thought of himself as a marketing guru? Or a strong leader?

• Clarity – As the saying goes, “he couldn’t see the forest for the trees”. When you are intimately involved and enmeshed in a situation daily it is very difficult to clear your mind of preconceptions and look at the situation from a fresh viewpoint. The same goes for all your other key employees and in some cases your board. You are all literally too close to the situation. A fresh set of eyes can “see” patterns or issues that are right in front of you but blend in due to your familiarity with them. Ever struggle with a puzzle piece and have your six year old walk over and just put the piece in the right place?

• Wisdom – It is critical that whoever you bring in have wisdom not just knowledge. Knowledgeable experts tend to be very tactical in their thinking and typically follow a clearly defined one size fits all process, without regard to the specific situation. They often fall victim to the weakness of jumping to a conclusion and then collecting data to support it. Advisors with wisdom have learned (typically the hard way) to first look at the context and personal dynamics involved in the situation (like Charley’s long time battle with eating right). They are fluid in their approach and have learned that although many issues have similarities they affect each company uniquely. They can also reflect on experiences from different industries and company cultures. There is no shortcut to achieving wisdom. It comes from personally experiencing many differing situations and seeing lots of mistakes. It is invaluable in critical situations. Just ask the US Air passengers who safely landed in the Hudson River last January.

• Courage – Often times as least part of the issue may reside with the business owner or manager. I find it really does start at the top. How many people have you met in your life who would sit down with a CEO and tell him face to face that their behavior is inhibiting the growth of the company? Tell them straight out that this is correctable but without addressing it everything else will have limited effectiveness. Do you know many CEO’s or managers who could do this for themselves? Do you think anyone on their management team would feel comfortable doing this? Do you think they would listen? My experience is that very few board members will actually do this. One of the key roles that the right advisor can play is addressing this issue. It is probably one of the key leverage points to energize a company’s growth. How do you think the company’s key customers, employees, and suppliers would react if the CEO started managing in a more proactive and empowering way?

One of the rarest and most valuable types of advisors available to a business owner or manager is the wise and experienced general practitioner (GP). So if you wake up one morning and your company is experiencing a severe pain, you may want to find out what is really causing it before you start spending lots of money and time based on a self diagnosis. Otherwise, like Charley, you may just be employing a very painful (and potentially dangerous) process of elimination approach.

Bill Gately - Principal

Copyright 2006 - 2009 The Rockland Group, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission prohibited.