

Dealing with Repetitive Problems

To be successful in business you generally have had to build a high level of expertise at problem solving. People expect their problems to be solved or to be able to solve them.

Most managers and leaders would agree they are accomplished problem solvers, so when an issue isn't resolved easily it can create considerable tension.

There are, however, some problems or tensions that require ongoing management, and finding a solution is not an option. It's important for all involved to understand the difference so that they can get on and solve a situation or ensure it is well managed. Getting the context right is a solution in itself.

Some tensions that exist:

Operations vs sales

Management vs leadership

Systems vs flexibility

Conservative vs risk

Growth vs consolidation

Service or product excellence vs sound financial principals

Save vs spend

Theory vs practice

Manage the problem or solve it?

1. Are all arguments valid?
2. Will a bias in one area create an imbalance and additional issues?
3. Is this an age old problem that keeps resurfacing because of specific triggers, e.g., a seasonal issue, or evident at different times as growth occurs?

4. Does there seem to be no clear solution. E.g.: work all the time and don't see my family vs stay at home all the time and don't go to work?
5. Has sufficient thinking time been given to this issue by the right people?

Things to think about when managing a problem

1. The role of leadership is to leverage tension for the benefit of the business.
2. Identify tensions to be managed, and let people know it requires management as opposed to being a problem that can be solved.
3. Use clear language so your people understand the difference, and the importance of managing it together, e.g., "Maybe this is something we need to recognise as an ongoing tension that gets managed well rather than expecting it to go away. We need harmony in both areas so how would that look? What do you need for your area to be able to work effectively...and what do you need?"
4. Where you have two strong people arguing, manage it so you don't have a winner. With these tensions there are some arguments you are not supposed to win. These tensions are the key to progress. "There are no winners here. The win will be in cohesive management of this – that is the measure of success."
5. Continually give value to both sides. Encourage a greater level of understanding of the nature of business and value in the parts which make up the whole. Understand the upside of the opposite side and the down side of the side you have a preference for. Help to develop critical reasoning. It will have great long-term benefits for the people and the business.
6. Learn to appreciate something that may not be your personal area of expertise or preference, e.g., cost saving vs the value of design
7. Don't think in terms of balance or being fair, think in terms of rhythm. There is a time to weigh in heavily and a time to lean away. There is a time for review and a time for action, a time for flexibility and a time for systems. Businesses have 'seasons', or needs, and at different times the company will require a different focus or push.

8. If you have recognised a tension, something that requires managing, it will require more management skill than leadership to get it to a good place. Don't always allow strong personalities to win the day but help them understand:
- There is never just one way
 - Tensions are a dynamic that will facilitate progress
 - Not to give up your passion that is equally valid and valuable (sometimes people give up their passion to avoid having to live with the tension – this is a very undesirable situation for the business and the individual).
 - Being black and white rarely gets the best out of relationships or colleagues and often creates a bias for the wrong reasons. Contribution from all parties will usually squeeze out better results and support sustainability and success.