



Climbing out of the Ruts

It's up to you

By: Ward Keever, CTG HealthCare Solutions Executive Director of Executive Services

When you get home tonight, I have an assignment for you.

Measure the distance between either the front tires or back tires on your car—it makes no difference which set you use. You will generally find a distance of 4 feet, 8 ½ inches. That's the way it has always been because that was the distance between the rails on the early American railroads. And several of these tracks were torn out to make the initial roads that the early automobiles traveled upon. Why was that the distance between the rails? Well, that's the way it was with the British railroad system and we hired British engineers to help design our early railroads.

The British rail system was a width of 4 feet, 8 ½ inches because that's the way it was with the British tram system which pre-dated their rail system. The trams were 4 feet, 8 ½ inches wide because that's the way it was with the initial British wagons used to haul produce to market. They were 4 feet, 8 ½ inches wide because that was the width of the early British roads built by the Romans. The roads were 4 feet, 8 ½ inches wide because that was the width of the Roman chariots, the first formal mode of transportation in the British Isles. The chariots were 4 feet, 8 ½ inches wide because that was the width required to accommodate the back end of two horses.

Now I can't prove the exact correlation between each of these modes of transportation. But I think you will agree with me that there certainly seems to be a pattern. And, I suggest to you that there are patterns within human nature just as there are within our modes of transportation. There are patterns in how we solve problems within our professional lives, how we relate to each other, and how we spend our time.

Patterns that help

Some of these patterns can be very successful. For example, as a CIO, I had established the outlines for various documents that would be developed as part of a standardized process for bringing a new project forward for consideration. We had a relatively brief project proposal document, which we called a Plan of Study, and if the project was approved as a formal project, the next document was a Solution in Principal, which became the basis for evaluating and approving the project for implementation. Each of these documents had a pre-specified outline to ensure all the critical points were addressed and presented for consideration.

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We had a well-defined project methodology which included a steering committee and a working committee. The steering committee was always chaired by the senior executive requesting the project. The working committee was composed of representatives of the various constituent groups that would be impacted by the project as well as members of the IT department. These methodologies, as well as others, proved to be very useful and promoted collaboration with our constituents and effective use of IT.

Patterns that hurt

But sometimes, patterns can be nothing more than unproductive ruts. We approach our work, our relationships with others, and the use of our time in the same old way and repeat the rut over and over again with unsatisfactory results. I think it was Albert Einstein who said that the definition of insanity is “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

For example, we go home at night and watch TV for two or three hours and then wonder why we don't have enough time to complete the tasks we have postponed. We sometimes argue with our spouses or significant others and wind up not talking to each other. Why do we always end up the same way? Maybe because we approach each other the same way over and over, even though it doesn't yield nor has it ever yielded wonderful results.

In our business lives, we can find ourselves in a relationship with our boss or a constituent that is not as productive as we would want it to be. And yet, we continue to approach the relationship in the same way over and over again, hoping things will improve. Maybe we need to rethink the approach.

Common ground: Key to getting out of the rut

A direct approach with a troublesome colleague might be to go to lunch and discuss how both parties can find a way out of the rut. Depending on personalities, addressing the problem head on can sometimes be very effective. Less direct approaches can also be helpful. Find something that you agree on—a common interest or point of view—and build trust and effective communication on that foundation. A problem that you work together to solve, where you find common ground and both can win, may be a positive interaction that then spreads to other, more difficult issues.

Sometimes, it's all about style or tangential issues. The real bones of contention may not be the content, but how it's presented or other underlying concerns. Consider changing your venue for interaction with the individual. Don't wait for the committee meeting to be forced to disagree or take a different stance in public. If you know there is going to be an issue, try breakfast ahead of time to work out any differences, emphasize the points of agreement, and forge a more productive relationship. Create an opportunity to really vet not only the objection, but also what's really important to the individual and *why* they object. Explore ways to overcome their concerns that allow the two of you to come into alignment. This used to be called greasing the skids! We often forget the tried and true approaches in today's world where time is a precious commodity.



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Years ago, I had a significant disagreement with another vice president around staffing levels and required staff support that was the result of our routine budget cycle discussions. We had a meeting scheduled with the CEO to resolve the issue. It was clear that the meeting would result in a winner and a loser. I called the vice president the afternoon before the meeting and asked if we could meet for breakfast. We did, and resolved the issue. We had found a way out of the rut, and the meeting with the CEO was not necessary.

The first move is yours

Another rut could be a relationship with a subordinate or member of your management team who constantly disappoints you with incomplete assignments. You discuss the issue as part of the annual performance review, yet it continues over and over again. You and that person are caught in an unproductive rut. As the one responsible for the leadership of your organization, *you* have the responsibility for finding a way out.

Continuing with the status quo doesn't reflect well on either party. But while it takes two to make the rut, it only takes one to break it. As the leader, it may be time to stop accepting missed deadlines. Being a hard worker is not a valid reason to miss deadlines consistently. Are your assignments reasonable and accomplishable with the resources provided? If not, then you need to make the appropriate adjustments that only you can make. If employees have all they need except for the discipline or innate talent/skill set to deliver—or if they consistently fail to align their individual priorities with yours and the organization's—then HR action may be warranted.

In the end, all good relationships are built upon trust. Trusting that your colleagues will deliver. Trusting that deadlines are established for good reason with appropriate consequences if missed. Trusting that action will be taken. Trusting that your boss has your back. Trusting that colleagues or constituents aren't objecting without reason. Take time to build trust in your relationships because trust breeds respect—and trust and respect are essential to getting out of unproductive ruts.

What do you think is the most modern form of transportation? Many of us would suggest it is the space shuttle. If you look closely at the two booster rockets strapped to the main rocket, you will find that they are 4 feet, 8 ½ inches wide. When NASA was questioned about the design, they explained that these rockets were manufactured in Texas and had to be shipped by rail to Florida. So their size was once again based on the old American transportation rut!

Yep, sometimes it's hard to get out of a rut. But if you think about the ruts in your life, I know you can consciously take a different path and break loose into a much more productive pattern. After all, if former presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton can enjoy international fundraising together in spite of their political differences, surely we can find productive ground on our own small turf! Good luck.

Tally Ho!

Ward