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Busyness is Not Good Business

Prepared by:
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Busyness is not good business!

The following word-for-word conversation took place recently between the Customer Service Manager of a mid-sized manufacturer and a consultant.

Customer Service Manager: I have 2 poor performers, Barry and Mary.

Consultant: How are you handling them?

CSM: Well, all our big customers are assigned to our good people and we handle all their calls. We route the calls from the small customers to Barry and Mary.

Cons: What's the reason for doing that? (My Thought: They can't do too much damage?)

CSM: Oh! So they'll stay busy! I want them to stay busy.

Cons: Who are some of the small customers?

CSM: (She rattles off several global retailers.)

Cons: Those are 'small' customers?

CSM: They do very little business with us.

Cons: Let me understand this. Issues for small customers such as (Global Giant) are all handled by two poor performers so they can keep busy.

CSM: (beaming) That's right!

No, I did not invent this conversation. But it's not the first time I've heard it. **Busyness is NOT good business**...or related to productivity or quality...or a way to deal with customers...or a way to improve poor performance!

It's not uncommon to find managers measuring activity instead of results, following from a pronounced tendency to focus on tactics rather than strategy. This tactical approach obscures results until it's too late and failure is upon you. You don't have to be a manager to fall into this trap also. Even experience administrative professionals can make this mistake.

Busyness obscures the results. Barry and Mary have no idea their performance is unacceptable since they are so busy they cannot imagine doing any more, much less anything different.

More importantly, in this scenario, 'small' customers do not get the attention they need. Some have drifted away and others refuse to increase the size or diversity of their orders because customer service is so weak. Some of these 'small' customers are actually very large companies with a large need for what this manufacturer supplies. These customers decided to give the manufacturer a chance and, with this level of poor service, the manufacturer failed. Because the manufacturer is well-known in the region, these experiences challenge the good reputation it has with 'big' customers. Everyone in this business community knows everyone else; bad news spreads fast.

The prescription for curing this sick situation is simple. If you are a manager, like the Customer Service Manager:

- work with Barry and Mary to **set clear expectations** for their performance based on the customers' needs and satisfaction,
- **train them in the fundamentals of the job**, especially solving customer's problems in a proactive and pleasant way,

- work with them to create **an improvement plan with clear measurements of results**, not activity, and
- **coach them regularly** to help them execute the improvement plan effectively

If you are Barry or Mary:

- ask your manager to **set clear expectations** for your performance based on the customers' needs and satisfaction,
- **get training in the fundamentals of the job**, especially solving customer's problems in a proactive and pleasant way,
- develop your own **improvement plan with clear measurements of results**, not activity, and
- **seek out coaching regularly** to help execute your improvement plan effectively.

When the CSM is satisfied all that can be done has been done to improve each individual's performance, it's time for a decision. Has performance improved enough? Does a new improvement plan need to be implemented? Is this a situation where the person is not a good match for the job and needs to move on or into another area of the company where their talents are useful? If you are Barry or Mary, is this job a good fit for your talents and experience or would you prosper in another situation.

Look at how you are managing both your good and poor performers. Are you tracking **activity—busyness**—or are you looking at employee **performance and customer satisfaction strategically based on results**? If you are caught in the **busyness trap**, extricate yourself by expanding your **strategic business plan**. If you do not have a strategic business plan, it is time to develop one. Employee performance should be measured based on your strategic business plan goals and objectives. Each employee has a role in fulfilling the plan. Follow the steps we suggested for the CSM or Barry and Mary. This approach helps you stay focused on managing your results and your employees strategically. **Focus on business not busyness.**

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