For Want of a Rubber Band

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7 Steps Ahead

The other day, my DVD player stopped working. Naturally, this happened the night I was sitting down to watch a movie I'd been looking forward to. Quite simply, the tray wouldn't open (presumably, it wouldn't close either, but there was no way to test that). As we all know, a feature of modern electronics is that there are "No user serviceable parts inside."

Nonetheless, I decided to open it up anyway. If nothing else, I figured I could at least recover the trapped DVD one of my kids had left in the machine.

Opening it up was an interesting experience. Inside was mostly empty space with a tray and a circuit board. Apparently the major difference between a portable player and a non-portable one is the amount of wasted space.

There was also one user serviceable part: the rubber band.

Yes, in the midst of the electronics there was a broken rubber band. That rubber band acted as the "drive train" to open and close the DVD tray. Just think about that: all this high tech electronics rendered completely useless by the failure of a sixty cent rubber band. How much is that rubber band really worth? Sometimes the value is not the cost of the item but what it makes possible. Sometimes the critical problem that is blocking us from moving forward turns out to be something small and simple, but only if we know where to look and what to look for. While I could have replaced the DVD player, that would have been a much more expensive solution than replacing the rubber band. Knowing the real problem enabled me to pick the best possible solution.

I was asked recently about my opinion on attendance point systems.

"Why?" I replied.

The person explained her company was having problems with absenteeism and people changing shifts without notifying anyone in authority. Based on this, she wanted my opinion of attendance point systems, presumably on the logic that implementing one would solve her problem. Unfortunately, without knowing exactly why people are not showing up for work on time, and without knowing why they're constantly switching shifts, implementing an attendance point system is as likely as not a solution in search of a problem. Sure it might work; on the other hand, it might not work. It's basically a roll of the dice.

So why jump to that solution? Simple. It's easy. Faced with a problem without an obvious solution, the natural response is to impose a solution that fits the symptoms. Symptoms, unfortunately, are not the problem; they're just the symptoms. Like taking an antibiotic for the flu, it doesn't help and may make you feel worse.

Instead, we need to work backward from the symptoms to understand the underlying problem. With my DVD player, the symptom was that the tray wouldn't slide out. Had I assumed the problem was that the electronics were fried, I would have tossed it and bought a new one. By investigating the problem, I had a working DVD player in less than fifteen minutes.

Investigating the problem, however, requires a certain amount of effort and frequently appears overwhelming and expensive. The lure of an obvious, easy, and, above all, cheap solution is very strong. The fact is, there are a lot of obvious, inexpensive solutions to many problems. In a business, it's particularly easy to find an easy solution particularly if you don't care if it actually works. If you want a working solution, though, the choices become somewhat more limited.

 Investigating a problem is rarely as overwhelming as it first appears. With the DVD player, it was easy to open it up and see what was going on inside. With human systems, on the other hand, taking them apart in that way can be a bit problematic. Putting them back together again is even trickier. The real key is to see how often the symptoms appear and under what conditions. What other symptoms are there? What do people say when you ask them about their experiences and their observations? As you put together a picture of the symptoms and when they appear, you can start brainstorming about possible causes. Does your organization have a cold? The flu? Is it suffering from growing pains?

At one company, everything was going great until they went public, had a huge influx of cash, and began a rapid expansion. Suddenly, all sorts of symptoms appeared: increased conflict, passive-aggressive behavior, confusion, inability to follow through on decisions, and so forth. Fixing the problem required first identifying what was really going on, and then crafting a solution appropriate to that organization. None of the problems were that big, but, like that rubber band, they were in critical places.

In a sense, it's not how big the problem is that matters most. What matters most is what that problem is preventing you from doing.

How much was that rubber band worth again?