Being Fred Flintstone

Stephen Balzac

Remember the classic kid's TV show, the *Flintstones?* Fred and Wilma Flintstone are a stone age couple who live in something that looks oddly like the 1950s with rocks. Lots and lots of rocks. Despite this, the show had nothing to do with either rock music or getting stoned. It did, however, have an episode which predicted that the Beatles were a passing fad. So much for prognostication! Fortunately, that episode is not the point of this article.

In one episode, Fred complains to Wilma that he can't understand what she does all day. How hard can it be to take care of a house? Of course, as Fred swiftly learns, after he and Wilma make a bet, the answer is very hard. Fred, of course, makes a total mess of the whole thing. Now, obviously, the cartoon was playing off of social issues of the time and was intended to make people laugh. The obvious lesson, that a "non-working mother" is a contradiction in terms, is hopefully one that most people have figured out by now. The less obvious lesson is the much more interesting one: it is often impossible to gauge from the results, or from watching someone work, just how difficult a job actually is or even how hard they are working! Conversely, how people feel about the results has little bearing on how hard you worked to get them.

At one company, a manager told an employee that he wasn't going to get a raise because he made the work "look too easy." Of course, one might argue that most people who develop their skill in a field eventually become good enough that they manage to make the job look easy. It's not until we try to imitate them that we realize just how hard it is to do what they are doing.

In another situation, the Principle Investigator in a biology lab had an employee who wasn't producing results. He first told the employee that she wasn't working hard enough and quickly moved to haranguing her to work harder. She quit and was replaced by another scientist. He also failed to get results and the process repeated until he quit. So it went through another two employees before the PI, quite by accident, discovered that there was an error in a protocol the scientists were required to follow. Each one had tried to discuss the possibility with him, but he consistently refused to listen, taking the attitude that any problems were purely a result of their lack of dedication. They simply weren't working hard enough and if they just buckled down and took the job seriously, they would get results! This attitude cost the lab four excellent employees and set them back over a year on one of their projects.

On several occasions, when I've stood in front of audiences ranging from management students to senior executives, I've presented the following scenario: "Someone at your company isn't completing their work on time. Why not?"

Invariably, the responses I get back are: "He's not dedicated," "he doesn't work hard enough," "he's goofing off," and so forth. Eventually, I point out that they really have no information from which to draw a conclusion. Occasionally, someone beats me to the punch, but it always takes several minutes before that happens. After the point is made, the number of dumbfounded looks is amazing.

Fundamentally, when we see something not working or something not getting done as fast as we'd like, we tend to blame the person doing the work. The tendency is to assume that they aren't working hard or that they don't care or some other fault in the person. We often assume that the difficulty of the task is proportional to how hard someone appears to be working, not what they are actually accomplishing. We tend to ignore the situation, often to the detriment of our companies. In that bio lab, if the PI had been

willing to consider other possibilities than blaming the scientists, he could have saved a year of effort and not potentially damaged people's careers.

By extension, there is also a tendency to assume that when the result looks small or insignificant, that the effort involved in producing it must have been lacking. Large and clunky is thus appreciated more than small and elegant, particularly in software. Unfortunately, this runs afoul of the Mark Twain principle: "I didn't have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote you a long one." Transforming something clunky into something well-built and efficient is not easy! Most corporate vision statements are wordy, vague, and meaningless. It actually takes a great deal of effort to create a short vision that works and that can inspire people for years.

Now, let's look briefly at the converse: that how people feel about the results has nothing to do with how hard you worked to attain them. At one startup company, the VP of Marketing told me that she expected everyone to work long hours because "our customers will want to know that we worked hard to produce this product!" Actually, with apologies to Charlie Tuna, what your customers want is a product that will work hard for them. They really don't care how hard you worked to make it. They only care that it meets their needs. If it does, they'll buy it. If it doesn't, you're out of luck.

The fact is, it's very easy to underestimate both how hard the work actually is, and how much work went into producing something. In both of these situations, the key is to figure out what feedback is really important. Results are a form of feedback. However, as long as you're on track to accomplish those results, then it doesn't much matter how hard or how easy it looks; as Fred Flintstone discovered, you probably can't accurately gauge that anyway. When something doesn't work, then you need to know the process so you can figure out why.

In other words, you need to clearly define your expected results and also clearly define meaningful and useful interim steps that should yield those results. The advantage of having those interim steps is that you can recognize fairly quickly when something is going wrong and you can figure out the real cause. A failure to achieve results is not necessarily the problem: it's the symptom. Perhaps it's because the person didn't work hard enough. Perhaps it's because the situation was untenable. Treat the symptom and not the problem and before too long you'll be right back where you started from.

Stephen Balzac is an expert on leadership and organizational development. A consultant, author, and professional speaker, he is president of 7 Steps Ahead, an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses get unstuck. Steve is the author of "The 36-Hour Course in Organizational Development," published by McGraw-Hill, and a contributing author to volume one of "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play." Steve's latest book, "Organizational Psychology for Managers," is due out from Springer in 2013. For more information, or to sign up for Steve's monthly newsletter, visit www.7stepsahead.com. You can also contact Steve at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.