

The Procrustes Method

Steve Balzac

7 Steps Ahead

What ancient Greek management technique is still in use today?

Fans of Greek mythology might remember the villain Procrustes and his bed. Procrustes would waylay travelers and force them to spend the night. Those who were too short for the bed were stretched until they fit; those who were too long were cut short. Procrustes was eventually killed by the hero Perseus.

Procrustes has the distinction of being the founder of the Procrustean school of management. In this form of management, companies identify a possible solution to something that is going on at the office and they import that solution with great enthusiasm. The solution is imposed across the company without regard to whether or not it fits. When it does work, it is hailed as the solution to everything. When it doesn't, the employees are blamed for metaphorically being too tall or too short. They are dealt with accordingly.

Fortunately, unpleasant as that experience might be, it is rarely quite as fatal as spending a night on Procrustes' bed. This is, however, a matter of small comfort to most people.

Eventually, one of several things usually happens: the company abandons the solution because the time and effort involved in actually implementing it turn out to be far more expensive than they initially appeared; the company implements the solution and discovers that the apparent problem either does not go away or has been replaced by something entirely new; the solution works, all problems are solved, and the theme from the Twilight Zone starts to play in the background. Okay, maybe not. Sometimes the solution really does work, especially when you've done your homework correctly. Based on the number of strategic plans that are written and shelved, this last situation happens rather infrequently. That could be changed though.

To begin with, it helps to avoid waiting until the problem is so severe that any solution looks good. There's a simple reality that the longer a problem is allowed to grow, the harder it will be to fix it when you do finally take action. Unfortunately, when businesses wait that long, they are often so desperate that they take the first thing that comes along and end up severely disappointed.

The next point is that the problem you are looking at is probably not the actual problem. What you are actually looking at is a symptom. While treating symptoms might provide some relief, in the long term the consequences are not always pleasant. It is usually okay to treat cold symptoms, at least if all you have is a cold. If you have the flu, just treating the symptoms might not be enough. If you have strep throat or pneumonia, just treating the symptoms can leave you flat on your back in bed for an awfully long time.

By the same token, when I hear that a manager can't delegate, I don't rush in to teach him delegation skills. All we have is a symptom; we don't know if the real problem is that the team can't accept delegation, if the overall goals are sufficiently vague that no one understands his instructions, if there are internal politics at play, and so forth.

Therefore, the first step is to identify the actual problem. What other symptoms are there? When do they come up? For example, if the manager is the one who can't delegate, we might expect to find that his instructions are unclear or that he's not giving his team sufficient information to act. If the team can't accept delegation, we might find that they don't actually understand the goals or that the goals have not been sufficiently defined, and so on. We are looking to see what else is going on, not locking into the first problem that comes to mind.

Once the actual problem, or at least some good possibilities, is identified, then it's possible to start proposing solutions. It can certainly help to explore how other companies have solved similar problems, but it's usually unwise to just grab their solution and import it. Solutions are rather like icebergs: there's a lot more going on beneath the surface than meets the eye.

When a company successfully implements a solution to a problem, that solution is customized to them. It's designed for them and implemented to fit with their organizational culture, values, beliefs, and approaches to doing business. Many of the factors that go into customizing the solution will not be obvious when viewed from the outside. Context is everything.

Grabbing a pre-existing solution often seems like a quick way to solve a vexing problem. Unfortunately, the price is more than just the cost of implementing the solution: it's also the opportunity cost of wasted time and loss of enthusiasm. Each time you force people onto the bed of Procrustes, they become more distrustful and less willing to make the next solution work. Better to move slowly and get something that's right for you. That way, if you do have to stretch yourself, at least you know that the resulting fit will be comfortable.