

Business Plumber

helping your work flow
...and your profit grow

Are you always whacking alligators?

It's an old, old problem

When we're up to our rear end in alligators we forget we're *supposed* to be there to drain the swamp. (Which could be just the job for a business plumber...?)

We all get distracted from important things - such as planning the future of our business - by the ordinary, everyday problems that simply refuse to go away. Like the proverbial alligators, ignoring them can produce immediate pain - but we often spend more time on them than we should.

(In a perfect world. Which doesn't, of course, exist.)

It's possible, after all, that draining the swamp is not an ecologically sound solution. Perhaps - on reflection - it might be better to leave the alligators alone to bite large chunks out of each other's sensitive bits, and build your enterprise somewhere else.

But when we're totally engaged in maintaining our usual number of limbs, it's difficult to think that way.

And - perversely - there may be something *comforting* about whacking alligators. In fact it's just possible that some of them are becoming household pets. (Well, they keep coming back, and we keep giving them attention - even if it's only by bashing them on the nose. Perhaps they *like* it...)

Besides, alligator-whacking does keep us very busy. No one can argue that what we're doing looks like a bad idea (after all, what on earth would happen if we stopped?) And it gives us the perfect excuse for saying 'You can see for yourself that I don't have time to think about that now!'

And what a relief *that* can be...!



Stop whacking, start thinking



'Whacking alligators on a regular basis does give us a heroic aura - but it doesn't solve the problem.'



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Strategic thinking - challenging 'what we've always done' - isn't easy. It takes time and effort. It can be painful: after all, it's no fun at all to discover that we've spent huge amounts of time, money and effort going down the wrong road. And it can lead to understandable, but pointless, recriminations. ('We could have done that *months* ago! In fact we could have done it that way from the start!')

So yes, it's true that courageously whacking alligators on a regular basis does give us a heroic aura. The snag is that it doesn't solve the problem, any more than giving up smoking three times a day, or bandaging the finger you routinely cut on that broken tool which somehow never gets repaired.

Like persistent weeds, these problems need to be tackled at root level. Easy to say, but they seem to have a knack of drifting right to the bottom of your 'to do' list because - again like persistent weeds - they're ugly, time-consuming, and thoroughly unpleasant to handle.

Worse, they may very well have their origins in a place where you'd never expect to find them. They may even indicate that something deeper and more sinister is going on somewhere else. (Where did the alligators come from? Where's the hatchery? Is there a giant mother alligator lying in wait, like something out of a high-budget monster movie...?)

In other words, they're exactly the kind of challenge that a real problem-solver wants to get their teeth into. (Which has to be better than fending off alligators who just want to get their teeth into *you*...) And look on the bright side! Finding the source and dealing with it, once and for all, could well deliver huge collateral benefits in places you would never have expected to see them.

In fact - in my (fairly long) experience - that nearly *always* happens, because people finally have the chance to look at their business with fresh eyes, and to start doing key things differently.

Do you really not have time to stop?

Even before Parkinson's Law we all knew that work expands to fill the time available to do it. Which is probably why time management continues to be a favourite focus for business coaches the world over.

With that in mind, consider this...

When you say you don't have time to get to the real root of the problem, you are absolutely right. But you need to ask one critical question.

'Why *is* that?'

Is it because you are making time to deliver the temporary, alligator-whacking, solution three or four times a year? (Or three or four times every month, every week, or every hour?)

What's the real, *objective* measure of the time it will take? And when (or if) you have tried it, are you being misled by the *subjective* measure? (The difference between the time it took for, say, your first kiss as against your first dental filling...?)

Doing things you don't enjoy always seems to take twice or even three times as long as doing things you like. And digging around in the roots of your business can feel almost as painful as having a dentist digging around in the roots of your teeth.

Even so - and bearing that in mind - a quick dose of root canal surgery for your business could end the pain a lot faster than those endless, unsuccessful short-term solutions.

Because they bring their own problems - in particular the one I like to call 'repetitive brain injury'.

Think about it. Every time that same problem comes up your first thought is likely to be 'Oh no, not again!' If your confidence is even slightly below par, the constant strain of dealing with the same, irritating issues over and over again will soon have you thinking they'll *never* go away.

And that's when you just might start taking inappropriate actions in response.

So what's the answer?

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'Doing things you don't enjoy always seems to take twice or even three times as long as doing things you like.'



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OK - so what's the problem?

'Try starting with just a piece of paper and pen - and write down the problem as you see it.'



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Try starting with just a piece of paper and a pen - and write down the problem as you see it.

Don't worry, this isn't a school essay, so you don't need to bother about style, spelling or grammar. It's just a way of helping you see exactly what the issue really is - or, if you like, to get a pen-portrait of your most irritating alligator.

And, of course, to check that it's the *right* alligator. Or, if you prefer, the right problem.

So - how *do* you identify the *real* problem?

Let's take an example. Suppose you've written down something like 'Client X never seems to pay his invoices on time.' So is that the problem?

Well, not necessarily. Instead of getting angry, or frustrated, and perhaps thumping out an ill-judged email to Client X in the heat of the moment, take the emotion out of the situation as much as you can, and then ask yourself one key question.

'That's interesting - I wonder why that's happening?'

Inevitably, that will lead to further questions. For example...

- Did you do a credit check on this client?
- Do you send your invoices promptly when the work is done?
- Are your invoice format and payment terms clear and easy to understand?
- Do you send reminders - or better yet get your PA or credit controller to call - when an invoice is overdue?

Can you see how useful this is? And how it might identify a hidden alligator in the system that's causing problems somewhere entirely different...?

Of course, the alligator could actually be in your client's system - but the same rules apply. Ringing them up for a satisfying (but ultimately fruitless) shouting match won't change anything. Instead, how about asking yourself that same question:

'That's interesting - I wonder why that's happening?'



Again, that will lead to further questions, such as:

- Is there a particular sort of invoice they have trouble paying?
- What's their internal process - could there be a problem they're not aware of?
- Is there a way you could adapt your own process to work better with theirs?

Thinking about it in this way may well lead you to start that tricky conversation in a rather different way - something like 'I notice you're having problems with our invoices: how could we make it easier for you to pay them?' It's an approach which shows that there could be something you need to do - but it also draws a convenient line in the sand. (You're not, after all, offering to cancel the invoice). It's less confrontational, it leads to a calm, adult conversation, and it's far more likely to deliver the results you're really looking for.

Of course, alligators come in many different shapes and sizes - and a good many of them come disguised as the latest, greatest thing in new technology. (Just ask anyone who has worn out their blue vocabulary when dealing with the latest software update.)

Take one very common example: the photocopier that always grinds to a shuddering halt just in time to scupper that last-minute job you absolutely *have* to get in the post. There isn't really time to fix it - you just need a solution that'll work *right now*. Which it does - until the next time...

'That's interesting - I wonder why that's happening?'



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The b***eredliness of inanimate objects...



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Assuming the problem's already there, wouldn't it reduce your everyday stress levels - and avoid repetitive brain injury - if you could spend just a few moments to fix the problem?

Again, start with that question; 'That's interesting. I wonder why it's happening?' And again, that might lead to further questions, such as:

- Does it only happen if I'm printing multiple copies? And if so, how many does it take?
- Does it happen when I'm doing a very long run?
- Does it happen more often when the job is double-sided?
- Is there a particular type of paper that works better - or worse?
- If this copier constantly fails during long runs, is there another one you could use that's more reliable?

And when the alligators are human...

Some alligators wear rather familiar faces.

There's the receptionist who constantly forgets the name of the person who's calling you - or (more confusing still) gets it just wrong enough that you don't recognise it.

There's the manager who's so concerned with KPIs and measures that he seems to forget that his staff - unlike his figures - might have feelings. And might even have some useful ideas...

And there's that amazingly creative guy in the advertising department who always comes up with superb ideas for campaigns that no one actually needs or wants to run.

In other words, if this team were an orchestra the percussion would be sounding a beat that was all their own, the brass would be out of tune with the woodwind (and each other) and the string section would be starting their own version of the Mad Hatter's tea party somewhere near the beginning of the second movement.

So what's the solution?

A good conductor helps - and that means not just good communication but good *management*, too. You could think of a well-constructed business as being like a well-written score. Only the conductor can see all the parts, but individual players know exactly what they need to do, and they're incentivised to work well together. After all, if they don't then they won't get many gigs and they certainly won't get paid!

Of course, that's an extreme example. Sometimes there's just one person, or one department, that causes problems for the system as a whole - but the results can be catastrophic. Many years ago I saw a presentation about wooden pallets - not the most inspiring topic - which made this point very well. Simple video games were all the rage at the time, so the opening sequence showed a computer-generated animation of a huge production line being brought to a shuddering halt when a single faulty pallet broke up and spilled its load.

The result? GAME OVER.

That particular (very effective) presentation had been written by someone from outside the company. Someone who'd been able to take a huge mass of information and reduce it down to a single, telling analogy.

The point being that someone outside the problem, and outside the system, will usually have a completely fresh point of view. And might even spot the single, tiny flaw that stops everything else working properly.

If that sounds useful, please give me a call. My first consultation is free - and it could just ensure that your game is very far from over.



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