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Clowning around: aligning resource and business vectors

by Harvey T.Dearden MIEE,
Time Domain Solutions Ltd

I have written elsewhere (Ref 1, 2, 3) about the ‘Reality Gap: The difference between the way things really are or can be, and the way they are fondly imagined to be’. These articles discussed the particular characteristics of this gap, in particular disciplines. This more general article considers recognition of misaligned behaviours and considers how they may be corrected to effectively close the gap or prevent its development.

Let us consider some of the characters that we may meet that will inadvertently or otherwise lead to a reality gap:

The Expert: will seek to exercise his expertise at every opportunity, regardless of the business requirements. Will seek every opportunity to enhance or promote his expertise.



The Enthusiast: (closely related to the Expert), will pursue his ‘hobby’ at every opportunity. Will promote wider involvement with his enthusiasm as he seeks to evangelise. Tends to differ from the Expert in that he does not jealously guard his knowledge.



Fashion Victim: is seduced by the latest fad without proper consideration of its true relevance to the business endeavour.

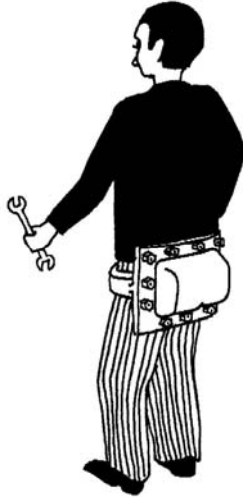


Empire Builders: their efforts are primarily directed to building their own power base and influence. The business is simply a convenient vehicle.



Cover-My-Ass Brigade: these guys avoid making judgement calls. Will always adopt the most conservative option regardless of profit implications. Will call

in a consultant at the drop of a hat. (Not necessarily a bad thing providing the consultant is efficient in execution of the assignment and delivers on a brief that is well aligned with the business objectives. If he borrows your watch to tell you the time, you will only have generated apparent profit.)



The Fear Monger: will (spuriously) prophesise disaster unless their recommendations are adopted.



Headless Chicken: is locked in panic mode and will promote an over-the-top, knee jerk response. (Not that they will describe it that way of course.)



The Ostrich: will pretend the problem does not exist in the hope that it will go away: It can happen, but I cannot recommend it as a business management tactic.



The Knight (in shining armour); will pursue what he perceives as a noble cause regardless of the business context. Useful guy if you happen to have a damsel in distress, but if your business is relatively distressed damsel free, he is likely to trip up your business with his misdirected lance.



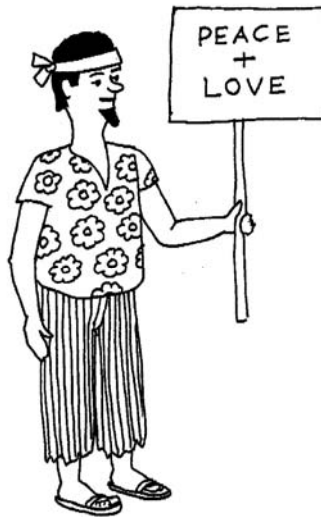
The Deckchair Attendant: is penny wise and pound foolish. Will distort the allocation of resources and energy to salvage relatively trivial sums without considering the wider impact on the business. (This is the guy that would redeploy a look-out to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic.)



The Extra-Terrestrial: is from a different planet to the rest of us, and has lost the plot completely. Sometimes has harmless entertainment value, but if in a position of authority, is likely to start all sorts of spurious hares running which take valuable resources to trap.



The Social Worker: is so concerned that we should all stay friends and be fulfilled, that the business can go hang in the meantime. (Sometimes confrontation and anger are forces for good; particularly if you happen across blatant, wilful distortion of your business.)



The Mystic: has supreme faith that all will, in some mystical way, come good in the end because this is the deserved and right and proper outcome. I distinguish here between the blind faith of the mystic, and faith expressed as a professional judgement based on belief in a plausible causal mechanism.



All of these guys are particularly dangerous when they are armed with a cheque book or budget.

True business objectives

Nothing exhaustive or rigorous about any of this of course and the disturbing truth is that we all exhibit all of these behaviours to a greater or lesser degree at times.

If we think of 'profit' here not as a financial measure, but as the wider benefits accruing to an enterprise from the efforts expended, we can conceive of a vector quantity for resource allocation or expended effort, and consider its alignment with

the true business objectives (see fig 1 below). It is only the $(\text{Cos}\theta \times \text{Expended Effort})$ component that generates real profit.

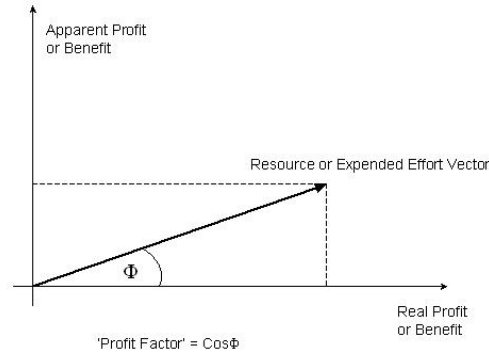


Fig 1

Any effort that is not properly aligned with the business objectives will generate 'apparent' benefit or profit as distinct from 'real' benefit. The classic manifestation of this is the 'busy fool' who works flat out to no good business purpose. (Electrical engineers will appreciate the parallels with apparent power associated with reactive loads).

The fundamental thing is to acknowledge that a significant proportion of the effort expended in a business may be improperly aligned with the business objectives. I do not claim that this is necessarily deliberate. Much of it is inadvertent; people will typically strive to do the right thing, but unperceived and subtle distortions may well arise because of misunderstandings or a failure to properly appreciate the true business context of their efforts.

Some distortions will be deliberate (but not necessarily self-serving) as people pursue their personal agendas because they believe the management-nominated direction is flawed in some way. Of course some misdirection will be both deliberate and self-serving as people pursue personal ambitions.

Perhaps the happiest circumstance is when a direction is both self-serving and fully aligned with the true business objectives. This is the undeclared aim of much of human resources personal development practice. The time honoured 'carrot and stick' has been used to steer individual effort into proper alignment.

Pursuit of excellence

In engineering there is often a pursuit of excellence for its own sake, but 'best engineering practice' is not necessarily 'best business fit'. We need to consider the practice in terms of the particular business context we are engaged upon. Don't take your business hat off when you put your engineering hat on. The need is for a rational, prudent approach, which tempers the pursuit of excellence with a pragmatic recognition of the operational context and the business objectives.

We are bombarded with success stories relating to implementation of different gurus' approaches to revitalising business. Of the returns typically identified, how much is due to the fact of having spent the time and energy in investigation and how much is due to the specific methodology employed? I suggest that pretty much any sensible, systematic approach would deliver the majority of returns if applied with appropriate time and energy. And what is the role of the professional engineer if not to bring a sensible systematic approach to business improvement and management?

For the most part, of course, it is not the intrinsic virtues of the approach that yields the results, it is the motivation, focus and enthusiasm engendered in the 'converts'. If it works don't knock it, but be clear about what you are doing and why. Japanese names sometimes seem to be adopted as incantations to invoke the beneficence of the capricious gods that haunt the business domain.

So how do you avoid misalignment? I'm afraid there is no equivalent of the electrical power factor correction capacitor: You certainly don't want people pulling in different but balanced directions so that the resultant resource vector is properly aligned.

The requirement is for continual vigilance in your management/HR systems, the maintenance of a healthy scepticism, and recognition of the problem and a willingness to tackle it.

Alignment correction

One attempt to provide alignment correction is through the promulgation of a mission statement. A well-honed mission statement can be a simple and valuable tool. Mission statements need not be confined to the enterprise as a whole; they may be useful at departmental level as well. Above all make sure your statement is perfectly aligned with your true business purpose.

Since there is likely to be a convergence on the generic in a mission statement, there is perhaps more interest in a statement of policy to be adopted in fulfilment of the mission. It is here that you can declare all the corollaries that are the rational outcome of your mission statement in the context of your particular operation.

The practice of 'management by objectives' may be useful, in which a rigorous top down approach is used in the determination of individual objectives. It is important in this to maintain a 'line-of-sight' between the individual tasks and the strategic aims they support.

Although this may be a worthy aim, it can be extremely difficult to maintain coherence through diverse hierarchical layers and at the same time get the necessary 'buy-in' from the wider workforce. But hey, no one said your alignment correction was going to be perfect; but it is very unlikely to correct itself. As I have sometimes had to remind the occasional engineer; if it was easy they would employ monkeys to do it.

Stay alert. Develop your instinct for misalignment. Routinely take a step back from the fray and ask yourself "What are we trying to achieve here?" It is a simple but nonetheless profound question. Once you start to critically review this, you may be surprised at how often people fail to ask this basic question and then set about a

problem that is more interesting, more tractable, more comfortable, but imperfectly aligned with your true business aims.

Alignment correction might be considered one of the defining roles of the true *business* manager.

References:

Ref 1: Safety Management: Beware The Reality Gap, IEE Engineering Management, Dec/Jan 2003/4.

Ref 2: Process Automation: Beware The Reality Gap, IEE Engineering Management (Online Feature), Feb/Mar 2004

Ref 3: Process Plant: How to Look Like a Hero! Manufacturing Excellence Conference, June 2004

About the author:

Harvey T. Dearden BSc CEng MIEE MIMechE used to be an engineering manager working at the sharp (making things) end of the chemical industry. He now works as a consultant in matters of process measurement, control and management. He can be contacted at htdearden@tdsl.org.uk, website: www.tdsl.org.uk