

Testimonial

“Although I’m not now, for a number of years I managed teams. I couldn’t put the book down until I’d finished it. For the next 48 hours - all over the weekend - I just kept getting thoughts cropping up: what if I have approached it like this, what would the outcome have been? It certainly got me thinking about all sorts of aspects of my managerial experience as well as how I treat people and my work now.” Ross

Extract

Planning

500 chickens made and stuffed in 4 weeks was the goal. Ah, you might say, it sounds pitifully simple, especially with several people wanting to be involved. Well, to a point. People have busy lives and this was something extra thrown in.

To be fair, this was a small and simple project when compared to activities we all take on at work. We could have dived in when available and done our bit - if the previous work had been completed and work was waiting for us. We may even have achieved our goal - but we didn’t know. The surest way to achieving was to look ahead and to produce a plan, taking into account what was needed to be done by when and allowing for contingencies.

At first, as a manager, I planned for everything. What if this happens . . . What if that happens . . .? Then, finding out that a high percentage of the time real-life rarely ever went according to the plan, I asked myself what was the point of using considerable amounts of time on unnecessary planning and stopped doing it.

Life became very interesting!! I found myself flying by the seat of my pants; forgetting where I’d got to previously; tripping over steps I had already taken; and trying to achieve activities that I hadn’t completed the preparatory stages for, to name just a few of the pitfalls I discovered. Very soon I started to feel overwhelmed and stressed. It wasn’t long before I was failing on the job too - visibly! To cover up I worked into the evenings and made progress while the office around me was quiet. My home life suffered and I felt miserable. I blamed being miserable on my job and came to deeply dislike the work that I had good reason to be fully capable of performing well.

This is no different to planning a journey. You probably wouldn’t decide to drive from Aberdeen to Bournemouth by writing down every single junction you could possibly be going to cross, neither would you start the journey without having a clear idea of what roads you are most likely to use.

So, I returned to planning to start straightening things out, finding a balance between the two ends of the spectrum. I found that the key with planning is in the middle ground. For me this was a series of pictures (signposts or

landmarks) that demonstrated that I was on the right road, identifying the key action stages. The plans were good enough to show me where I needed to be when; quick enough to produce not to have a huge (negative) impact on my working day; provided me with a framework with which to communicate with others; and to highlight where I needed external assistance. A plan such as this leaves room for everything changing, which it often does!

Emergencies will happen from time to time, things that you would probably never consider when you sit and think about the 'what ifs?' No amount of planning will see you through these. At these times, like me you will undoubtedly make mistakes. That's to say, undertake activity that does not give the most efficient and/or effective progress you decided on for your outcome. At such times you can only rely on your experience, intuition and questioning ability. Congratulations! This is where you stumble across learning opportunities and the chance to expand your horizons. These opportunities are easier to recognise than those provided by everything going well and the lessons you learn will be better remembered because, as I have found, they are often emotionally charged - even if it's embarrassment. If you learn these lessons well, and apply what you learned, you need never need to repeat any particular mistake.

Not long ago I accepted a contract in the Head Office of one of the UK's biggest High Street retailers. I had a clear remit to gather a group of administrators from around the function and form them into an efficient and effectively working team that could be handed to a manager on her return from maternity leave. On the Thursday of my second week my remit changed to: forming the team; assessing their work to find out what was involved; finding where they could fit in other parts of the function; to negotiate; and then implement the moves. Not surprisingly, the 20+ members of my team didn't take the news well. I needed to act quickly to reassure them. But what did I have to offer them, I hadn't got a clue how I was going to achieve the moves.

What I did was to have a creative member of my team take a map of the globe and draw an arrow from the UK down the west coast of Africa, around it's southern tip and then up to India. I divided the journey into four sections representing the four months we had and wrote a weather forecast for each month. I also decided what the boat and the base rules and roles were going to be. The journey took us around the Cape of Good Hope at about the half-way stage and delivered us to Goa - so that the staff would be delivered to the most appropriate part of the function for them to Goa!