

Career Path: When the Best Course of Action is Inaction

Career Development



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Have you noticed there is an incredible bias toward action at work? Just consider what happens when we identify a problem. The single correct response is to craft a solution. We are so motivated to do something, anything, that we overlook one of nature's great problem-solvers: doing nothing.

This is no paean to procrastination for the sake of being lazy. No, let me tell you why our desire to intervene, to meddle, and to change things is so often counterproductive. In brief, it's because crafting effective solutions to real problems is hard. By spending precious resources to improperly or only partially deal with problems, we can easily make things worse.

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Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

Our desire to tackle problems is admirable. We should celebrate the mindset that says "We can do this," and does not shy away from hard work. But let us not mistake good intentions for good outcomes. Just because we have our hearts in the right place, we get no free pass from accountability for results.

Practical and pragmatic

I had these thoughts after writing an article about how often government spending to achieve societal outcomes not only fails to achieve the desired outcome, but rather worsens the very situation politicians wanted to improve. See Can Big Government Spending Make Anything Better? Although the desirability of the policy objective cannot justify failed policies, it is depressing how often we hear only about the goals and never about the results.

Now to be fair, I thought it would be appropriate to shine the spotlight instead on corporations. How well do we do in solving the problems we set out to tackle? I admit I'm biased when I say that I believe corporations are pretty good at solving problems, at least compared to governments.

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One key reason for better business performance is that we have skin in the game. That is, we're spending our own money and we can't print more when we need it. This means we are more attuned to prioritizing solutions that may be practical and pragmatic, and much more wary of waste.

Pausing and problem-solving

But that's not to say companies are perfect in solving problems, are we? I explained a number of reasons why employees in corporations also fail to solve problems well in the two-part series Identifying Problems Worth Working On and Identifying Solutions That Will Work.

I recommend you have another look at these articles before we get too confident about our problem-solving abilities. In short, we are distracted by pressing but non-strategic problems, which means we waste our time. And we underestimate how hard it is to implement good solutions by failing to account for the full costs our solution requires and the world's stubborn resistance to change.



Stopping and thinking about the problem is worthwhile. Zhitkov Boris / *Shutterstock.com*

Now let's consider what happens when we pause instead of jumping immediately into implementing solutions. The pause gives us precious time to spend thinking about our problem. By considering my earlier advice about how to both choose problems worth solving and design solutions most likely to succeed, we increase the odds we can craft a better solution than if we jumped in with well-meant but misguided action.

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> none exist.

And here's something else to keep in mind about waiting. You will be amazed when you wait how often your problem turns into something different than it first appeared. Sometimes what looked like a massive problem turns out to be just a few anecdotes that got blown out of proportion. Because humans are such great pattern-recognition machines, we see connections where none exist. My favorite problems were the ones that simply evaporated when we left them alone. This happened often.

Sitting with the problem

Or maybe you realize upon reflection that what looked like the root cause of the problem isn't the only cause, or even the main one. Difficult problems typically have multiple causes, and focusing too quickly on one increases the likelihood your solution will be partially effective at best.

When you give yourself time to sit with a problem, you can spend some time thinking about the foreseeable but unintended consequences of any proposed actions. Is what you want to do entirely consistent with your company's values? Could someone seeing only part of the problem or part of the solution reasonably misunderstand or criticize your actions?

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The pause also provides you time to conduct a pre-mortem, in which you forecast the future and brainstorm all the ways your solution could fail to address the problem. Anticipating why your solution may fail is so helpful to good problem-solving that you should never embark on a costly solution without first wallowing in its likely failure.

For all these reasons, I say the next time you're facing a problem at work, take a deep breath and … do nothing, at least for a while. And if anyone asks why you're not doing something, tell them you're actually doing the hardest thing: thinking.

Be well.

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