

When the Water Level is Low - the Stumps will Show!

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Agility Life Lesson #11

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I think I first heard that insightful Southern saying over thirty years ago when I was a young thirty something HR Director learning my way around the business world. I was riding between Wrangler jeans plants with our Divisional Finance Director, Woody Miller, as we went go plant-to-plant with other senior divisional leaders and share the annual “state of the business” story with all employees. Woody was filled with simple, pragmatic wisdom that spilled beyond the moment. I should have filled a notebook with these sayings – they were plentiful and meaningful and some have stayed with me all these many years.

The 1980’s were some very turbulent years involving heavy inflation, deflation and culminating into a disruptive crash at the end of 1987. We had moved to England in 1986 where I was able to learn much more about business and myself as I headed up Human Resources, Strategic Planning and Total Quality Management based out of Nottingham for a couple of years. I found Woody’s adage applicable around the world and as economic conditions worsened – the stumps of inadequate workforce development and leadership skills, weak businesses processes and fragmented technology platforms became abundantly apparent across many industries around the world. Across the U.S., the stumps related to textile industry production and apparel manufacturing had become so prevalent that by the end of 1990’s, manufacturing in the U.S. for these industries was found only in the history books.

Now we are living in the era of “accelerated obsolescence” where the pace of change is game changing for those unable to adapt and adjust fast enough. Just like the water level at my lake house ... things can change so fast in today’s environment. Last week, my dock was floating ... this week it is far from it. The good news here is that it helps me clear the stumps and rocks around my dock. If my business survival was at risk ... not so good.



On my drive out to the lake today, I got word that one of my friends who had started a new business just last year has already had to shut it down. We operate in a very competitive and consequential environment where even when you have a “great idea” ... it takes more to navigate and survive.

Whether navigating on your lake, in your latest new start-up or in a large enterprise, we will all experience times when the water level gets low and our stumps will show. The vital questions include:

- Are you anticipating change by staying alert and proactive to scan for your stumps or those of your competitors? Or are you consistently getting caught by surprise?
- Are you regularly generating confidence with all your stakeholders by staying connected with active communications, alignment and engagement?
- Are you able to initiate action better and faster – operating with sense of urgency, empowered decision-making and active, collaborative teams?
- Are you encouraging and liberating thinking throughout your ecosystem ... maintaining customer-centric focus and valuing idea diversity?
- Are you keeping your eye on the prize ... with all stakeholders understanding what success looks like and how to measure it?

We are at the start of another new year ... maybe high water for some and could be low levels filled with stumps for others. Use these questions to try and identify some of the “stumps” in your operating system ... could be with your leadership or workforce (people), might be your business processes and practices, or just might be that your technology platforms (or lack thereof) represent your biggest stumps. Most important is that you stay alert and not be complacent.

One step you might take is consider doing your own “AGILITY AUDIT” to systematically examine those questions with your teams. You might also consider engaging experienced third-party to help give you an objective, trained assessment. Just like with your personal health, where it is vitally important to get your annual physical to monitor and detect things that could be life-threatening.

The Agility Audit helps examine your organizational health and fitness to face the faster paced, more demanding and much more turbulent operating environment.

How are your agility vital signs and where are your stumps? Good to discover early before too late.



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