

# We are all Fire Fighters!!! But, should we be?

*“American business leaders pride themselves in fixing urgent problems, but, this comes at great cost.”*

The North American manager is a harried individual running from meeting to meeting, always busy with little time. Does this busyness lead to effectiveness? We don't think so.



American businesses reward the procrastinators who finishes strong and heroes that save the day. In school it's the all-night cram session that gets the good grades. In sports it's the Hail Mary pass that wins the game or the buzzer-beater from mid-court. In fact, sports teams plan for the last minutes of a game.

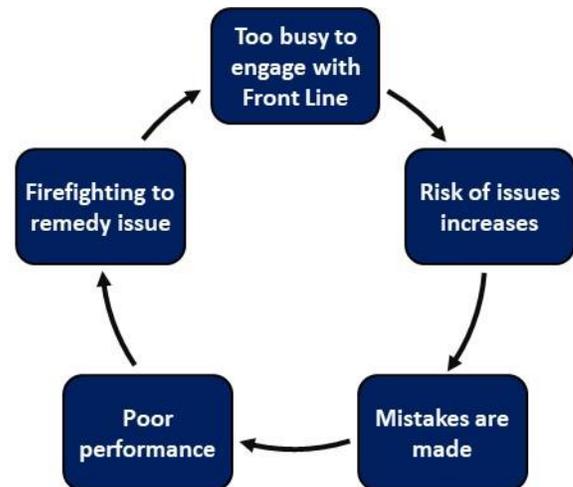
In the workplace, we have many similar examples:

- The department that misses plan for two quarters and continues to claim it will make the annual plan.
- The tendency for managers to be booked up in meetings scheduled by someone else for information purposes only.
- The small nagging issues that only get addressed when a customer calls or something metaphorically blows up.

While leaders complain about busyness and their inability to have time to focus on the most important opportunities, company business models reinforce the practice. Companies reward and give special recognition at townhall meetings for the team that scrambled to get a product out at the last

minute or delivered a customer order that was behind schedule. Almost no attention is spent on why the situation occurred and what the cost was – both monetarily and organizationally – to deliver this seemingly Herculean task.

**Figure 1 – Firefighting Doom Loop**



We see firefighting (Figure 1) taking a toll financially, on human resources and on the basic business of the company. If the squeaky wheel is always getting the grease then everything needs to squeak to be addressed. Everyday business activities get pushed aside as the small issues that could have been addressed earlier at lower levels in the organization now need senior management attention.

Falling into the trap of firefighting can lead to other serious issues:

- Important, non-project tasks and milestones are missed.
- Firefighting mode becomes 'business-as-usual,' ignoring critical overall department or company strategy goals.
- Poor customer perception of the organization.
- No time for a project de-brief or lessons learned.
- Stress and uncertainty, inherent in firefighting, will eventually lead to a toxic workplace.



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## Solution

Using another sports analogy, the solution is simple, focus on the team rather than the star. Getting off the firefighting treadmill requires empowerment, a new perspective on problems and leadership discipline.

- Empower and encourage employees throughout your organization to find problems early and address them immediately, preferably with a solution that eliminates re-occurrence. Provide highly visible recognition for these efforts.
- On bigger issues that rise to the level of senior management involvement, investigate why the problem wasn't identified and dealt with earlier.
- Acknowledge each problem not as a challenge but an opportunity that can help the company to improve its process robustness and avoid re-occurrences.
- Management discipline is required to avoid the tendency to reward the Herculean effort and rather encourage employees to engage in problem solving.

Just as most safety programs have a goal of zero safety incidences, we need to set a goal of zero re-occurring problems.

## Future Vision

Imagine coming into the office one day and looking at your calendar. It is blank without any meetings scheduled. You might then take the time to call important customers that you had been meaning to reach out to, have lunch with a rising star in the organization, pull out the strategic plan and identify next steps, ... After all, aren't these the real value adding activities of an executive, not fighting fires?

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We wish you success in your journey toward being a recovering firefighter.

*Helping companies to accelerate performance improvement.*

