



## MANAGING DELAYS

BY SHARON EAKES

**M**y husband, Hal, and I rented a houseboat and traveled down the beautiful St. Johns River in Florida. After a short lesson at the dock, Hal had mastered driving the boat. When he needed a break, I took the helm. I have studied systems and understand delays. I knew that this less-than-graceful vessel did not have power steering, that there was a delay between turning the steering wheel to the left and actually going to the left. However, as the boat headed toward shore, I yelled, "Help!" Hal ran to the front of the boat (holding up his pants!) and straightened us out. I took over again. I talked to myself, saying, "Be patient. Don't turn sharply. Wait out the delay. This is like the Beer Game." And yet, when I could see we were headed for some expensive boats on the other shore, I got scared and turned sharply. I zigged and zagged, finding it impossible to wait long enough after each correction, needing to *do* something.

In systems thinking terms, a delay is when the effect of an action occurs after a break in time. The break may be seconds or years, but in real life, waiting out a delay without intervening can seem interminable. We live with a multitude of system delays in our lives and they can be frustrating.

- The time between planting seeds and harvesting vegetables or flowers
- The time between starting a manufacturing process and having a finished, functioning product
- The time between arriving at the check-out line at the supermarket and heading home with groceries in the car
- The movement from summer to fall to winter to spring
- The time between the first inkling of a creative idea and the completion

of the painting/novel/software program

- The movement of children through developmental stages
- The ups and downs of the stock market

### "Do Something"— The Struggle for Control

In our organizations today, we believe that one of the best ways to improve a system's performance is to manage its delays, which often means reducing or eliminating them. A good example is offered by Logli Supermarkets in Rockford, Illinois. Logli sells more groceries than any other supermarket in Illinois. Reasons for their success are obvious to any customer. With 23 check-out lines available at all times and a system of free drive-up service, where teams of effi-

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cient young people load groceries into your car, the delay from entering the check-out line to driving home is all but eliminated.

Sometimes managing a delay means making it more palatable, which is why decorating physicians' offices has become a popular, new interior design niche. When patients find waiting to see the doctor comfortable and interesting, they are less likely to complain about how long it's taking.

But most of the time, when we try to manage delays, we are in crisis mode. We move quickly, coming up with fixes that may have negative, unintended consequences. Much of the time we don't even realize that

we're experiencing a delay. When we act and don't immediately see results, we feel compelled to do more before we even experience the outcome of our initial intervention. Doing something, anything, reduces our anxiety and makes us feel more in control, even if we're really making things worse over the long run. But acting in these circumstances can lead to overcorrection, much like what happened when I caused the houseboat to zig and zag all over the river.

### "Do Nothing"— Trusting the Process

So how can we overcome our impulse to act, whatever the consequences? A good first step may be to see and acknowledge the delays in the system. For example, when we reach a juncture where our performance seems to have plateaued or a problem symptom isn't improving, we can say, "We may have hit a classic delay." Especially if we can't change a delay, we must respect and trust it. If our patience is still wearing thin, we can ask a few questions before taking action:

- "If we do something, what will happen? Will we create additional delays or problems down the line?"
- "If we do nothing, what will happen?"
- "What can we do to live with our anxiety while we figure out the best response?"

A second approach to managing delays is to *manage yourself*. Sitting on my hands and breathing deeply eventually helped me stop overcorrecting the houseboat. Reading about and talking with other parents about typical behavior for a 13-year-old helped me survive my daughter Lisa's early

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teens without either going crazy or taking rash action that might have caused more problems.

Managing delays in creative projects (including software development) can be tricky. Start by accepting the need for incubation and “soak” time in a creative process and build latitude into the schedule. Creative people almost always underestimate how long a project will take, because they already have a vision of the finished product. Also, many of the most creative solutions come after a period of inattention to the problem or sleep, when the limbic region of the brain is active. If we press forward too aggressively and feel pressure to create *now*, we never access these powerful thought processes.

Thus, managing a delay may mean doing something counterintuitive for a while: nothing. We are a very “doing” culture, and many of us have a hard time sitting back and waiting. This kind of inaction in the face of an ongoing challenge requires a great deal of trust in the process.

When aerospace manufacturer Woodward Governor sought to reduce delays in the production of

aircraft engine controls, after several failed interventions, the organization finally decided to stop work-arounds. Previously, if a group on the assembly line was missing certain parts, they borrowed them from other teams. Over time, this pattern of borrowing backfired. It was hard to keep track of parts borrowed from various projects. They were seldom replaced in a timely way. So when the original team needed the borrowed parts back, they had to spend time tracking them down and often resorted to borrowing them from somewhere else in the plant—another time-consuming work-around. In their eagerness to keep products rolling, workers had unintentionally slowed down the entire plant.

To reduce delays, people had to be willing to do nothing. When they were short of parts, instead of borrowing, they waited to receive a new shipment of inventory. After a while, to everyone’s amazement, the plant began to meet deadlines consistently. As they finished orders on time, they stopped having a backlog of work. At first employees felt uncomfortable, because they worried that the work was running out. In a short time,

however, they got used to this more regular stream of activity and found their jobs much less stressful. Workers were happy about going home earlier. Customers were delighted with the on-time deliveries. Woodward Governor had successfully managed the delays in their manufacturing system.

In some cases, the best response to a system delay is to say the Serenity Prayer. (This may seem corny, but it can help.)

“God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot  
change,  
The courage to change the things  
I can,  
And the wisdom to know the  
difference.”

When we stop spending energy trying to change things that are not going to change no matter what we do, we have more energy to work on those things on which we *can* have an impact. ■

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## R E M E M B E R I N G B I L L O ' B R I E N

**B**ill O'Brien, founding member of the board of governors of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning and a key figure in Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline*, died August 24. Bill was the chief executive officer of Hanover Insurance Company from 1979 to 1991. Within the company and the business community at large, he was known for his groundbreaking efforts in refining corporate vision, values, and sense of common purpose.

During Bill's tenure as president and CEO, Hanover moved from the bottom of the insurance industry (in terms of key operating ratios that measure profit and growth) to the top

quartile. Because of this performance, McKinsey & Company included Hanover in a 1994 study as one of the “top 10 underwriting companies” in the industry. In 1998 Bill set down what he believed to be a company's core values for aligning human beings and their work environments in *The Soul of Corporate Leadership: Guidelines for Values-Centered Governance*, part of Pegasus's *Innovations in Management Series*.

Bill was an early adopter of the reflection and inquiry tools of action science and of the systems thinking approach to understanding large-scale business problems. He developed a deep interest in the framing of a com-

pany's governing ideas, leading ultimately to a series of booklets that set forth Hanover's “philosophy to work by.” Values such as leanness, openness, merit, and localness became intimately linked with the insurance company's success.

Since retiring in 1991, Bill spent much of his time helping other organizations consider the ways in which leaders can marry individual growth and economic performance in their companies. We will deeply miss his practical philosophy and profound values that included a deep respect for those around him and life in general.