We forgot to manage the management

10-Feb-2010 - Top-Consultant.com's management consultancy columnist, Mick James, this week argues that a lot of declines will have to be managed in the coming future.

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Years ago I had the pleasure of seeing the late Dr Michael Hammer in his pomp, striding around the stage like some demented mixture of Gordon Gecko, Bill Hicks and Chairman Mao, expounding the new creed of Business Process Reengineering (BPR).

"The work!" he cried. "We forgot to put anyone in charge of the work!"

What might he be saying today? Might it be something like "The management! We forget to manage the management!"

This thought occurred after an illuminating conversation with an outfit called Blue Plate Consulting. Blue Plate, let's make no bones about it, have a product to plug, having obtained the UK license for a product called KeyneLink. What does it do? Well according to its (American) inventors, what it does is "strexecution", but I can't see that term flying over here, except possibly on QVC. Put simply it's an "execution management" system that "bridges the gap between strategy and execution." A web-based system that lets organisations take the lofty goals agreed at board level and not only break them down, level by level, into tasks and targets for those lower down the organisation, but also monitor progress and performance.

It's a product Blue Plate believes could easily be disseminated—rather than aggressively promoted—by consultants as a leave-behind item that clients would undoubtedly find useful.

"From a consultant's point of view it's pretty good," says Blue Plate MD Jeff Herman. "It's delivered via the Web and there's nothing to configure. By selling licenses you can generate some annuity income, it's the Holy Grail to do that."

Amen to that—I suspect that clients are always a little disappointed that consultants don't in fact have more little tools and tweaks to pull out of their bags before they leave. It's also my view that a lot of the best applications coming out nowadays fall between stools—they're not technical enough to appeal to the concerns of the IT user, but too general to appeal to vertically-oriented business users. In such a situation you're rather in the hands of individual early adopters, which can only lead to the horror of corporate Twittering.

I also believe that these sort of innocuous-looking products can be quite transformative. Herman says that KeyneLink will help to bring "transparency and clarity" to the management process. Everyone can quite happily pay lip service to a concept like that, but what would be the consequences if it really happened?

William Burroughs once wrote about the "Naked Lunch," the moment when everyone realises what's on the end of everyone else's fork. I imagine for some businesses achieving clarity in the process by which C-suite decisions translates into coalface action might be something of a "Naked Lunch" moment. Imagine if you would work it the other way—derive a board level mission statement from low-level actions. "To relentlessly erode market share by producing low quality, ineffective products, and ignoring the complaints of the mugs we have foisted them on." That should do for half the telecoms providers I've ever used.

I'm a great believer in honesty, but the corporate process mitigates against it. I never really got the knack of sitting in a meeting and simultaneously asserting that this was the greatest and best-run company in the world but at the same time we desperately needed to change everything we did. For leaders, expounding a message that has any hint of "negativity" about it is the hardest thing to do, as desperately as that message may need to reach the rest of the organisation.

Recently everybody has been expressing their surprise at the appointment of Royal Mail boss Adam Crozier as the new chief executive of ITV. Where's the link? Personally I'm not surprised at all.

What the two organisations have in common is a combination of outside forces—new technology, increased competition, changing consumer habits— that have sent them into decline.

Not "terminal" decline, note, although some hacks believe the two words are welded together. But decline there has been, and decline there will continue to be, even while both organisations remain powerful forces. To hope, as one analyst wrote, that Crozier can "turn ITV's fortunes around" is to miss the point. There is no going back to the good old days of the "license to print money". On the other hand there would seem to be plenty of life in these old dogs, providing they don't spend too much time and energy trying to learn new tricks.

Not for the first or last times I urge my readers—look at Woolworths. Outflanked on any number of sides they tried to be all things to any number of people and fell between a multiplicity of stools. In the past an inability to come to terms with decline has led rather to immediate annihilation as companies break rather than bend before the wind.

The way the wind is blowing, there's going to be quite a lot of demand for well-managed decline as not only companies but industries and entire ways of life coast down to oblivion. The problem is articulating this in a corporate culture where in normal circumstances the dictionary begins and ends with "G is for growth". I wonder how many companies found the recession a lopsided relief—at least they could downsize without embarrassment.

How feasible it is to be open about a strategy or decline when all the markets are behaving like Tony Soprano and simply banging your head on the dashboard while screaming "Gimme my f**ing money" I don't know. But half of nothing is always better than all of nothing, and how nice a change it would be if one day the workers could look up to see that what was cascading down on them was, for a change, the pure, clear truth.

All views expressed in this article are those of Mick James and do not necessarily reflect the views of Top-Consultant.com and Consultant-News.com.

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