

CEO Tip: “We’ve got a problem!” – There’s Always Only One Main Bottleneck

by Guido Quelle

“Boss, we’ve got a problem!” – How many times have you heard those words? Most likely – no matter what the number – too often.

How do you respond? Do you start looking for solutions right away? Careful! The first question is: Do “we” actually have a problem, or is it just an employee who has a problem and would like to involve us in it? So your first response should be along the lines of: “I see you have a problem. Now explain to me why it’s also important for me.”

As a rule, what follows is a whole series of explanations as to why a certain situation didn’t develop the way it was meant to, and that it’s hard to get to the bottom of the difficulties. All the talk is about problems, difficulties, and bottlenecks.

Let’s assume it’s not just the employee’s problem, but also affects you. If so, you need to identify where the main bottleneck is, to distinguish it from the various other potential stumbling blocks, and to clearly define it.

The key insight: There’s always only one main bottleneck

When trying to solve the problem, focus your attention on the most effective point: Where should you begin in order to fix that part of the problem that could then get the broken-down process up and running again, even if not yet perfectly smoothly? Where is the main limiting factor?

When it’s springtime and you connect a water hose to the outside water hydrant to water a tree and no water comes out of the sprayer head – what do you do? Buy a new sprayer head? Check the hose for holes? Granted, the sprayer head seems a little clogged and there are a few small holes in the hose, but you’d still think some water would come out, wouldn’t you? The two bends in the hose don’t seem to be the problem, either.

Most likely you’d then check the outside hydrant to make sure it was working. If you found out it wasn’t, you’d then go to the main water valve inside the house and make sure it was open. If there then *still* wasn’t any water, you’d most likely remember that you’d found a letter in your mailbox the day before, informing you that the water would be shut down for two hours today. So, now we’ve found the true bottleneck.

To build on this example: When you’re looking for solutions – with or without an employee – don’t search for them in the details. Instead, call things that are supposedly self-explanatory into question. Make sure you haven’t overlooked something important, so that you can quickly restore system performance. And never try to work on too many problems at once, because there is really ever only one main bottleneck at a time that needs to be remedied before you can move on to the next one.

So, if you project your employee’s problem (“Boss, we’ve got a problem!”) to the level of your whole company, you may very well find that there is a wholly different problem that you need

to tackle at this level. If so, then send the employee in question (alone or with colleagues) to deal with their problem, while you concentrate on the true bottleneck.

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