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Avoid the detour and speed bumps

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Since it's officially the middle of winter, according to Punxatawny Phil, we'd like you to take a minute to close your eyes and think of summer in Michigan: crisp blue skies, shimmering lakes, kids running barefoot, Oberon by the poolside, and, yes, road construction.

On any given day in the summer in Michigan, you will most likely hit road construction. You will have no choice but to slow down and watch out for the inevitable roadblocks. Maybe you will unexpectedly have to drive off the road, around a ditch and back onto another path.

And, of course, you have to watch out for those construction workers who are holding those "Drive Slow" or "Detour Ahead" signs with the supposed intent of ultimately making things easier and faster for us.

We can pretty much guarantee that no matter how sunny and warm it is outside, when you approach a construction site, it is no longer "sunny and warm" inside your car. We'll bet your frustration builds as you possibly become late for a meeting or event. You mentally count the dollars and cents as your engine wastes fuel as you idle at a standstill.

And you anxiously tap your toes watching one of those construction workers maneuver a forklift from drive to reverse over and over at about five miles per hour.

Take a second and compare this construction site to your workplace. Have any roadblocks kept your organization from getting stronger, being more productive and going faster? If so, remove them.

While you can't control construction in Michigan, you can control your workplace: Streamline your assembly lines, update your computer systems, and move employees to where they can be most productive. Build an organization where people can innovate 100 percent of the time and fight bureaucracy 0 percent of the time.

Then, see how fast you will be able to drive your organization to success.

In today's high-speed world, technology can make or break you. It can effectively help or roadblock your systems, employees and assembly lines. And if you are still living

in the 1960s with the computer language of COBOL, or even in the 1980s with your Commodore 64, you are effectively stuck behind a jack-knifed trailer on I-94.

Long-term performance is contingent on having the best technology available that you can afford. But as a leader, it is your job to balance cost efficiencies with customer engagement. Think of all technology can do for a company:

Performance Metrics – In the short term, meeting quarterly earnings projections is paramount. In the long run, you can't be successful if you don't keep the big picture in mind. But you have to not only set goals; you have to track how you are measuring up. And you need a good system to help you do this.

The Southwest Michigan First team looks at our goals weekly and tracks them against an annual timeline and a five-year plan. Just this past year, we determined in September a potential shortfall in one area and pulled our entire team's resources to focus on the issue. At year end, not only did we meet the goal, we exceeded it.

Automation – An automated phone-answering system can help you handle customer calls and even reduce headcount. Automate whatever you can so your employees can serve your customers better.

Since we like to “walk our talk,” let's give you another example from our organization. Each year, we receive an average of 150 requests from companies looking to locate in our region. We have three excellent team members dedicated to putting those proposals together, which means they are very busy. In the past, each individual created their own customized proposal.

This past year, we made it a priority to create one unified packet filled with constantly updated information. It took three months, but we automated the whole process. What used to take a person potentially a full work week now takes 15 minutes. Next year, if we need to fill three times the amount of requests, we can even do it with one team member.

But be careful. If your customers are turned away, automation does nothing for you. Ever call your credit card company with a random question? If it is not about your current balance, your new address or a lost card, you have to be pretty smart to find a menu item that will get you to a customer service representative. How many times have you had to hang up and try again or just plain given up and taken your business elsewhere?

Product or Service Excellence – Machines allow us to assemble parts in a sequential manner using carefully planned systems to create a finished product faster and better than by hand. Human error is taken out of the equation. With the latest technology, your product can be made to the same optimal specification every time as fast as possible for more customers. Research what is out there. Research what your competitors are doing. Then do it better.

The assembly line developed by the Ford Motor Co. between 1908 and 1915 made mass production and the car famous. Toyota perfected the system its way by adding core values to the system in 2001. Again, beware: If machines are relied upon too heavily and humans lose touch with the “line,” as Toyota has learned recently, ill effects await you. It is the responsibility of a leader to manage his or her people *and* systems.

Information, Information, Information — Your company is no better than the information it keeps. If you have out-of-date customer information, eventually you will

lose sales. You can't have too much current information. Track everything. Track your sales. Track your top 100 customers. Track your targets. Track their birthdays. Track your sales for the day, month and year. Track each team member's sales.

This really goes back to our No. 1. When you meet a challenge or roadblock, you need to have accurate information immediately. When sales are tight, a birthday card to your No. 1 customer might make a significant impact on your profit margin.

So, let's get back to that construction site. Think of your company as perpetually under construction. You can always find a better way to go faster, sell more and provide better service to your customers. Just make sure you do it without the orange "Drive Slow" and "Go Slow" signs.

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