

Tired of Getting Burned? Stop Fighting Fires!

Prevention tips and basic strategies help you take control

BY KATHERINE BONTRAGER

The scenario is all too familiar: A problem ignites and demands immediate attention, delaying your projects, which in turn smolder until they flame up and must be extinguished. The cycle is vicious and never ending.

Spending less time fighting fires starts with preventive measures. But when a fire does threaten, some basic strategies will help you squelch it.

An Ounce of Prevention

An inherent step in avoiding fires is making sure the processes in place are as flameproof as possible. That's where classic Six Sigma tools such as failure mode and effects analysis (FMEA) come into play, said Christine Frishholz, a Black Belt who has held executive roles in financial services, retail and hospitality industries, and is co-founder of the consulting firm The Cicerone Group.

"FMEA is used to systematically consider all the failures inherent with a new process," she said. "So people are thinking: What can go wrong? How likely is something to go wrong? How bad is the problem likely to get? And how detectable is it?"

Frishholz said that once you have outlined a potential fire, and its severity and detectability, you need to focus on who is accountable for preventing or mitigating it. "Have a plan in place to avoid a fire from happening," she said.

Properly managing your time also can forestall an inferno, according to two other consultants – Julie English, a certified professional coach, Master Black Belt and CEO of Within Reach Consulting LLC; and Lynn Lanoue, a professional coach, certified Green Belt and CEO of BWI Coaching & Consulting LLC.

"People need to frame their days to help avoid fires," English said. "We ask coaching clients to write down a daily success or goal statement. For me, that's spending quality time with my children; taking two hours to deal with priority issues [and] networking; and finally spending two hours with my door open to field questions, issues and problems."

Lanoue agreed that professionals should set aside a few

hours a day for quality, focused work, but acknowledged that this can be tough because it entails letting calls go to voice mail, ignoring emails and disregarding other outside interruptions.

"It's hard to turn off instant messenger or ignore a call," English admitted. "But...I guarantee, you'll get more accomplished in two hours of uninterrupted work than you'll get in four hours of work with constant disruptions."

Lanoue encourages clients to post their open-door hours. "Once everyone knows your availability, they learn how to communicate quickly and efficiently, and are more likely to respect your time," she said.

Building time into your schedule to plan, review progress and results, and stay connected to the buzz is of utmost importance, Frishholz agreed. "Staying attuned to what's happening to the organization as a whole will offer insight so you'll be better able to anticipate or prevent problems," she said.

She also finds that workers spend less time fighting fires if they are clear about their goals, objectives and priorities. "I think it's great when everyone documents three big things they're going to accomplish in the month," Frishholz said. "This way, if a fire comes up, it's easy to prioritize. Should this problem actually change intended goals for the month? Does it need to happen? Can it be done with fewer time resources allocated to it? This tool keeps you focused on the big picture. You can't wallow in a problem because you have to get back on track with your plans for the month."

Firefighting 101

Despite the best-planned processes and best-prepped people, occasional fires are inevitable. Be ready with these strategies:

Delegate

When the heat of the fire is overwhelming, Lanoue has clients ask themselves: "What can I triage to someone else?"

“Much of firefighting is delegation,” Lanoue said, “and not only does it get something off your plate, it’s great training for those around you. You’re empowering people to make their own decisions. Sometimes, we delegate to one person all the time, simply transferring the stress to someone else. Instead, delegate to teams made of one person with more experience and one with less. In each team, there’s the opportunity for learning.”

Anticipate

Lanoue said that aside from prevention, anticipation is one of the best firefighting skills. “I came from the medical industry, and the biggest time for fires was always in the holiday season,” she said. “So we knew this time of year required a certain amount of staff.

“Look at the trends of your business and how cyclical they are,” she advised. “Do fires tend to spark up in your own dry season? Then plan appropriately. And if you’ve been delegating and empowering people throughout the

When Is a Fire Not a Fire?

Everyone knows that when there’s smoke, there’s fire, right? Well, not always. Sometimes what appears to be a fire is actually a smoke screen.

“The caveat is that some things masquerade as fires,” cautioned Frishholz. “If I’m told we need a budget forecast in X amount of time and I’m the only one who can do it, I need to determine if the problem is really the same magnitude of fire I’m hearing about. Do I need to fight it or is someone else better suited? There are many ways I can spend my time, and if I’m not vigilant, I won’t be able to get to that which is best for the company.”

What’s more, whoever is directing you needs to be made aware of the ramifications of you switching to firefighter mode, Frishholz said. She recommended saying, “This is what I was working on. What are you most comfortable with slipping on the timeline? What at the end of the day is going to be most beneficial to our team?”

Lanoue agreed that you really need to assess the situation. “There’s a definition of firefighting that’s wasted effort and there’s a definition of a new opportunity. Ask yourself, ‘Is this issue non-value added? Will it [distract] us from our goals? Or is it a welcome new opportunity we need to put time towards?’ We forget we have the opportunity to say that if this isn’t value added, let’s put it on the back burner.”

year, when busy times occur people feel more capable so the fires aren’t as big.”

Educate

In the midst of fighting flames, avoid being a manager who overcompensates, answering all questions, solving all problems. “It makes us feel good to provide the answers,” English said. “But it really leads you to constantly fight fires over and over again – including fires that aren’t your own. Instead, ask questions to coach your team to find the answers. ‘What are your next steps? What is possible?’ They’ll begin to answer questions themselves, saving you from fires that really aren’t that important.”

Calculate

When an inferno is mounting, turn autopilot off, take control and plan just how much time you will need to man the hoses. “How much time do you spend on complaining instead of working on the project?” Lanoue asked. “It’s easy for us to complain, overwhelm ourselves and freeze.”

Evaluate

Once the fire is out, Frishholz advised, “Have a post-game session with lessons learned.... Ask, ‘What could have prevented this that was within our control? Was there some warning sign? How well did we respond? Were we efficient and effective? Did everyone follow procedure?’ It’s so beneficial to learn from a serious problem and then make adjustments as needed.”

Frishholz saw firsthand the benefits a firestorm could render. She was working at a hotel during 9/11. “People were stranded due to airport shutdowns, incoming clients couldn’t get into town, and then there was the almost immediate recession in travel,” she said. “All these things rallied and focused the team, and built pride and accomplishment. It hadn’t been anticipated, but we used our resourcefulness and shared vision to get through it.” Afterward, the team took the opportunity to learn, plan and prevent future problems from occurring.

Lanoue finds that if issues constantly occur on the same project, it’s a great time to take stock. “Document your fires, and a picture starts to form,” she said.

Celebrate

And don’t forget, recommended English and Lanoue, to reward yourself and others once the smoke has cleared. Good firefighters need proper kudos for keeping the business safe. ♦

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