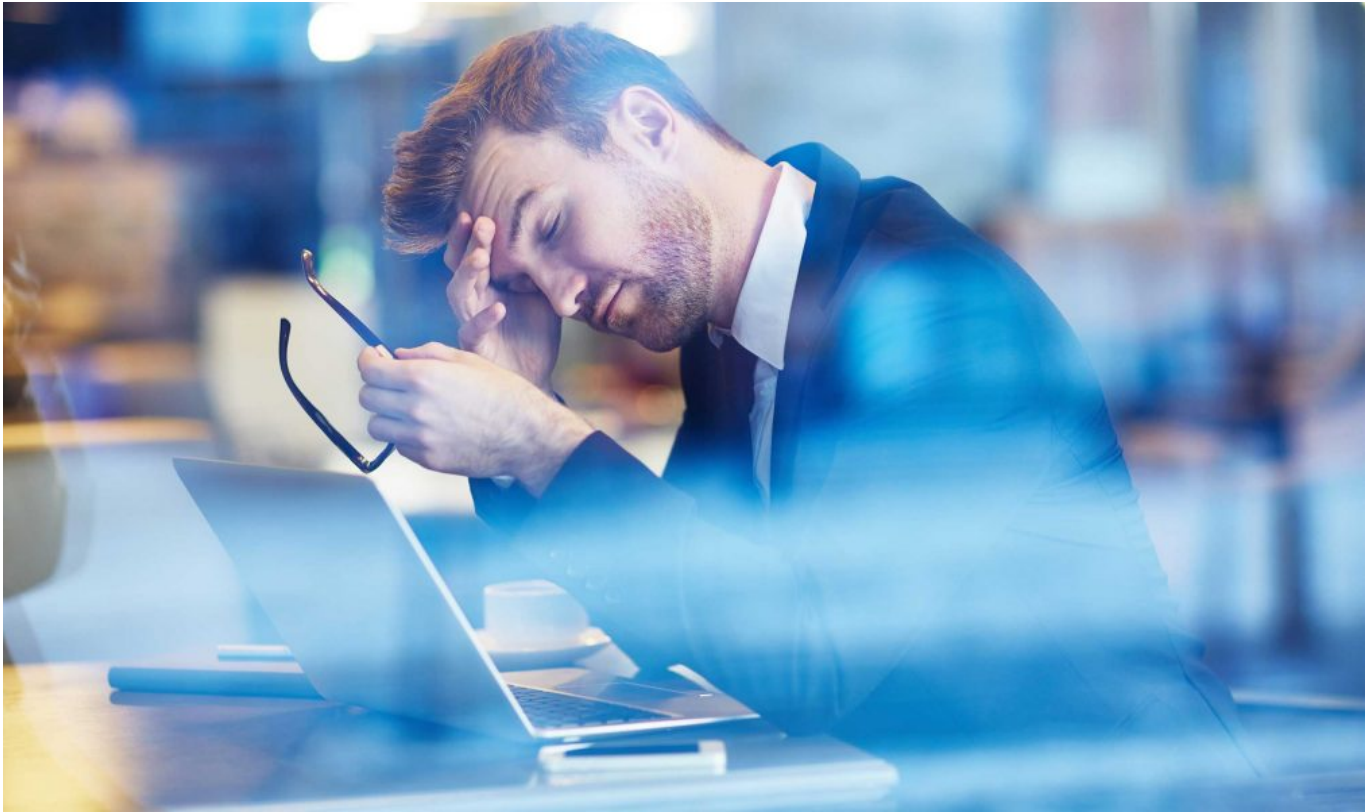


Weeds

Written by: Carolyn Thornlow, CM | January 26, 2016



Previously, I wrote [*What's The Most Important Thing a Manager Must Know?*](#) The article was about, of all things, failure. While this is not a topic most managers are drawn to, we can't really talk about success without talking about failure; they're opposite sides of the same coin. A successful operation involves the interplay of thousands of variables. If we could pinpoint which variables could assure success, then our decisions as managers would be clear. This is what the authors of popular business books, such as *Built to Last* and *In Search of Excellence*, set out to do. By interviewing successful companies and then identifying the attributes they all had in common, the authors posited that because these companies shared traits, the traits, therefore, must have caused success. In reality, it is impossible to say which variable is causing which outcome. This is why the scientific method demands control groups, studying one variable at a time and assuring studies are blind. Without the ability to do this, the next best proof of a theory is the test of time. The companies studied in these books have suffered since their halcyon reviews. Attributes once thought the province of only the successful were merely proximate, probably not exclusive, and evidently not causative. As with other areas of scientific study, the more certain and immediate proof of what causes an outcome is found during autopsies or when the game ends. Only then, after all the variables have ceased to bounce around, can you follow the trail from an absolute immutable outcome, namely, demise, to its cause without noise and distraction. Failure, it turns out, delivers superior wisdom when you must know an accurate

driving variable. My research, and the coda of *What's the Most Important Thing a Manager Must Know?*, finds that the single cause of failure—across time, disciplines, and entities—is disconnection. A disconnect occurs when a resource, person, awareness, or process, upon which another component in the system relies, becomes misaligned or totally unavailable. The mantra for managers is unequivocal: find the actual and the on-the-verge-of-actual disconnects and fix them. Unfortunately, chances are you won't. **That's because managers are often trapped in the weeds.** While this reason is simple, getting free from the weeds is not. Weeds are beguiling, like the Sirens of Greek mythology who caused sailors to crash into the rocky shores. Often, managers don't even know they are in the weeds until it is too late. **The precursor to managing truly relevant aspects of business, then, depends first on the ability to identify the weeds in your professional life. Here they are:**

1. DOING THE WORK

It happens: substantive processes break down. It is preferable to have a backup for these occasions rather than have the wheels of progress shut down. Thus, it is common for managers to jump in to save the day. The problem with this is that if these interventions are rewarded or deemed heroic, a habit of doing is reinforced, never giving opportunity to the task of finding disconnects.

2. TIME MANAGEMENT

Since processes are wont to break, time has to be set aside for that potentiality. However, even if managers cure operational breakdowns, organizations themselves undermine unwittingly the necessity to do higher-level thinking. In a world gauged by outputs, profits, and immediacy, systems to motivate employees are structured similarly. While those systems may be appropriate for staff responsible directly for production, it is not the right fit for managers. Consequently, time is diverted away from the intellectual heavy lifting that is needed to run a business.

3. NATURE ABHORS A VACUUM

Even if there were ample time and little distraction, determining the most important thing on which to focus provokes anxiety. It's like staring at a blank slate. Without external prompts, managers have to rely on other modes of analysis and creativity. These modes fall into the realm of soft skills, for which there is little indicia of progress early on. This can leave managers filled with doubt, feeling like they are floating in a vacuum. It feels far more comfortable to fill the void, even if it is filled with tasks that are ministerial in nature and could be performed by someone else.

4. FAMILIARITY

In childhood development circles, experts say that one of the most important things you can provide for a child is a sense of stability brought about through familiar routine. There is a neuroscientific basis for this. The startle response (also known as the orienting response) to any change in our environment is a biological

evolutionary function that let our ancestors know that a predator was in their midst. Adrenalin pumped and blood rushed to the larger muscles of the limbs so that they could escape the threat easily. In a modern workplace, this autonomic response to change is not only unpleasant, but also counter-productive to the tasks that demand thinking. That's why we are programmed to keep structure and surroundings exactly the same as they were the day before. Our very own human systems make it unnatural to go out of our way to find hidden disconnects.

5. INVISIBLE GORILLA

In their book, *The Invisible Gorilla*, authors Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons explore inattention blindness. The title refers to a social experiment in which participants were tasked with counting the number of times people in a video passed a ball to one another. At the end of the video, viewers were asked if they noticed the gorilla. In the middle of these ball-tossing people stood someone dressed in a gorilla suit. Yet, participants failed to see it because they were so intent on counting the number of passes. You can see this for yourself in a [public service announcement \(PSA\) produced by Transport for London that is based on this experiment](#). Hence, you can also see how easy it is for managers to miss disconnects even when they are in plain sight.

6. EDUCATION

University systems favor specialization, especially when it comes to business. We major in finance, marketing, or human resources. The effect of a narrow focus showed up in an informal study I conducted. When people who owned or worked in a business were asked, "What is the most important thing when it comes to building a successful business?" the answers were diverse. Nevertheless, they correlated to the answerer's discipline. Marketers thought marketing was important; human resource experts thought people were the most important drivers of success; and finance people thought managing finances made all the difference. Whether education creates or merely reinforces a predisposition, it plays a role in fortifying what psychologists call [My Side Bias](#). This, like any other "weed", precludes seeing a bigger picture.

7. NEVER TOLD WHAT TO DO

If we committed to rise above the weeds by conquering our anxieties and biases, unhooking from distractions, and committing the time and attention to become Sherlockian in our quest to find disconnects, we still wouldn't find them. That's because doing so relies on context clues and the ability to see the big picture. Unfortunately, most managers have never been shown how to map a big picture complete with causal links even though it is a teachable skill.

In my next post, I will tell you how to find disconnects in your business so that you can do your best work.

About the Author



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