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EXCELLENCE FATIGUE AND THE NORMALIZATION OF DEFECTS



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

The willingness to tolerate and assimilate recurring problems into the work flow and operations of an organization is technically referred to as the normalization of defects. Normalized defects are to organizations what broken windows are to urban neighborhoods. They undermine a culture of excellence and create disincentives to innovation. If mediocrity is tolerated long enough it becomes expected. Morale for higher capacity team members plummets and it becomes harder to attract top level talent. The motivation to collaborate diminishes because fewer visionary projects are initiated.

If you've talked with programmers about the problems that come with the release of new software you may be familiar with the running joke they use in response to early user complaints: "That's a feature not a bug."

In sarcastic, tongue in cheek language, they are simply relabeling something that isn't working properly, a bug, as an intentionally designed feature of the program. Of course pretending a problem doesn't exist will only exacerbate negative customer feedback. You can call a bug a feature all you want but there's another saying that applies here: if



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it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, well, it's a duck.

The fact of the matter is every industry learns to tolerate recurring problems rather than fix them. It is part of the cost/benefit analysis that is done up and down the organizational hierarchy all the time. This willingness to expect, tolerate and assimilate recurring problems into the work flow and operations of an organization is technically referred to as the normalization of defects.

The highest profile example of normalizing a defect comes from NASA. Foam insulation had broken off the launch vehicle on nearly every shuttle launch. These foam pieces became virtual projectiles that hit the underbelly of the shuttle. It happened so consistently that it was eventually viewed as a normal consequence of the launch process. The foam was not designed to break free and hit the shuttle underbelly. But it happened so consistently that it became a feature, not a bug. It was the normalization of a defect.

Abnormal Expectations

Managers, scientists and engineers at NASA stopped asking serious, rigorous questions about this defect. They fully expected it to occur and began to view it as an unintended but normal part of the launch process. Eventually, the space shuttle Columbia, having been struck by a piece of foam the size of a briefcase, was damaged badly enough that the thermal protection system failed causing it to disintegrate upon reentry. The shuttle was destroyed and an entire crew was lost, a tragedy that shook the agency out of its complacency.

Thankfully the stakes associated with normalizing a defect are rarely this high. But every industry, every organization, is vulnerable to what I describe as excellence fatigue, where recurring problems that don't appear to be debilitating are eventually normalized. It is impossible to know how many recalled products have their roots in excellence fatigue that normalizes a defect.

It would be easy for church and mission leaders to dismiss this entire conversation as appropriate for

business schools or corporate board rooms but irrelevant for the non-profit community. But the fact of the matter is we normalize defects all the time. My first exposure to this idea in a business book gave a specific non-profit example, where checks to a charity were routinely misplaced, put in the wrong file or on the wrong desk, sometimes for years. The situation was tolerated because the amounts were typically small and there was a steady stream of contributions. Eventually the checks would surface or the donor would call to inquire and a search would commence. But virtually no energy was invested in shoring up the systems to prevent the problem from occurring in the first place. It was a feature not a bug.

I know you're probably thinking you will never have enough checks coming in the door to normalize a defect like this. But I bet you do have recurring problems that have worn down your team and produced excellence fatigue. Misleading forms are routinely filled out incorrectly. Candidates have to submit the same information three times to three different offices. Links on your web site don't go to the correct pages. The auto-attendant for your voice mail sends people on a wild goose chase. People routinely show up for meetings ten minutes late knowing they will not miss a thing because you never start on time. Everyone knows about the problem and has heard the complaints but it's happened so often there is little urgency to fix it; the defect has become normalized.

What may be even more disconcerting about excellence fatigue and the normalization of defects in churches or mission organizations is our tendency to cover our tracks with phrases like, "it's good enough for church work," or "we can't afford excellence," or "at least our motives are good." That's a cop out at best, shameful at worst. God deserves more. And deep down I know you share my passion to rise above excellence fatigue and the normalization of defects as you strive to offer God your very best.

Organizational Broken Windows¹⁵

The broken window theory was first posited by James Wilson and George Kelling in an article published by Atlantic Monthly in March 1982. The idea suggests the willingness of a neighborhood to tolerate vandalism and graffiti establishes a social norm, inviting a downward spiral of crime and antisocial

behavior. Here's how they described it in their seminal article:

Consider a building with a few broken windows. If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may even break into the building, and if it's unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside. Or consider a sidewalk. Some litter accumulates. Soon, more litter accumulates. Eventually, people even start leaving bags of trash from take-out restaurants there or breaking into cars.

George Kelling was hired as a consultant by the New York City Transit Authority in 1985 and measures to test the broken window theory were put in place. The transit authority targeted subway graffiti and after the election of Mayor Rudy Giuliani in 1993, they expanded the application to include a zero tolerance of fare-dodgers, public drinking and uninvited window washers who after rushing to clean windshields at red lights demanded payment. A 2001 study of crime trends documented a sudden and significant drop in the rates of petty and serious crime.

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eXcelerate Your Organizational Potential

As part of our desire to be champions of a renaissance of excellence, innovation and partnership in mission we launched a new annual award in 2009 called eXcelerate. We also created a full circle organizational development process called improve, designed to help organizations embark on a journey of feedback driven continuous improvement. This is an extension of our commitment to advancing the effectiveness of the Great Commission community in North America.

Each year we receive nominations for the eXcelerate Award in three categories, excellence, innovation and partnership. Our award selection team narrows the list of submissions and asks for additional information to help us make an informed decision. The award is not limited to affiliates of Missio Nexus and can be presented to any individual, church, organization or kingdom company in North America furthering the Great Commission in ways that model excellence, innovation or partnership in mission. Each year's award recipient is featured in our annual *eXcelerate* magazine.

We recognize many worthy initiatives will only come to our attention if people inside the organization let us know so you are welcome to nominate something happening within your own team. Nominations can be submitted from the Missio Nexus web site at www.MissioNexus.org, go to the About Us tab and click on Award Nomination in the pull down menu.

In conclusion, here are a few simple questions for you to consider. First, in what areas of your ministry have you made a feature out of a bug, accepting some area of underperformance as normal? What are you doing to combat excellence fatigue? Where do you most need a fresh infusion of excellence, innovation or partnership? I hope to see your church or mission on an eXcelerate nomination next year.

NOTES

¹⁵ Content for this article has been updated and modified from the original August 2010 Learning @ the Speed of Life vlog. The original vlog post features information about the 2010 *eXcelerate Award*, highlighting several organizations nominated but not selected for the annual award.

Sieze the Vuja de is a compilation of transcripts from Learning @ the Speed of Life, the video blog of Missio Nexus, by Steve Moore. Missio Nexus was formed out of the merger of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange and is the largest network of Great Commission oriented evangelicals in North America. For more information visit www.MissioNexus.org.

Other books by Steve Moore

