

A Headless Chicken Leading the Blind

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My wife coined the phrase, “headless chicken leading the blind,” last week. Her organization is experiencing a bit of a crisis and such is how she described the phenomenon. It’s common enough that we all feel familiar with it without any description.

Something goes wrong and it’s serious enough to affect most or all of the business. Suddenly, customers and executive leaders are not only paying attention, but are paying visits to, “help.” No one wants to show up to the daily progress report meeting with answers like, “We didn’t accomplish anything today,” or “I don’t know,” so everyone is busy doing anything that can result in any kind of apparent activity or result whether it makes sense or not.

The problem extends into enough functional areas and involves enough processes that no one simple correction will solve it. That means that no one really knows who is in charge of solving it, or who should be. Directionless chaos is leading the way and no one person perceives enough of the problem to single-handedly provide a meaningful solution. Thus we have our title phrase.

Generally speaking, the real challenge is not solving the problem. The real challenge is managing the chaos. Everyone is so busy being busy for the sake of appearing like they are solving the problem, that no one can invest the time and attention for critical thought. We all know it, but we don’t like to argue it to stressed leadership, even though we know they should know it to; sometimes the best, most effective activity for solving a problem is simply sitting still and thinking it through.

So, here are some ways that I and my many mentors and colleagues who taught me have successfully brought the chaos under control to solve a complicated problem during a crisis. When I sit down to write them down, I discover how simple in

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concept, if not always in execution, these lessons are.

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