

The Four Rules of Ruts

by : Dave Anderson

Ruts - they're about as welcome in your business as Dan Rather at a Bush family BBQ. But while unwanted and uninvited they are part of business reality. The good news is that by understanding the four rules of ruts you can lessen their frequency and shorten their duration.

The first rule of ruts

Realize that when you find yourself in a rut that it's not the result of something you did last night. Rather, when you're in a rut what you're seeing is the result of a series of bad decisions, failed disciplines and repeated errors in judgment sown over time that are just now manifesting themselves. Somewhere along the line you got away from:

A. Consistently training your people.

You found reasons to cancel the meeting rather than make it a priority and hold without excuse. This weakens discipline and allows your team's sharp edges to become dulled and diminished. Some managers have the same aversion to conducting effective, consistent and credible training meetings as Superman does to Kryptonite; werewolves to silver bullets; and Madonna does to soap and water. If you think your job is just to pencil and close deals, do inventories, budgets and dealer trades you don't have a clue what leadership is about. In these times, you can buy computer programs that pencil deals and hire clerks to do dealer trades and inventories. Your job is to get people better and/or get better people; to take the human capital you've been entrusted with and make it more valuable tomorrow than it is today through training. If you don't get this, you're hopeless as a leader.

B. Holding people accountable.

Rather than face and correct poor performance you opted to live with it since at the time comfortable inaction was more convenient than caring enough to confront your people. By turning a blind eye to deficient performance and/or defunct behaviors you tacitly reinforced the wrong thing and, as a result, you're reaping a banquet of mediocrity sown by your own neglect.

C. Making necessary decisions and changes.

Rather than continue to attack the status quo and innovate your way to new and higher levels to maintain your momentum, you pledged allegiance to the status quo: "If it's still around it must work and it must work since it's still around"; "Don't make waves"; "Don't mess with our success"; and other mantras of manure. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. You can't afford to freeze in a comfort zone and become calcified in a mold. If you don't make waves you'll drown and if you don't mess with your success a competitor will. You've got to stay in motion because when you stop to rest, reflect or celebrate too long you break your own momentum and it takes five times the effort to restart. Momentum is always easier to steer than to start.

D. Exercising other vital disciplines that reinforce your culture and maintain a positive pressure to perform.

This includes everything from conducting consistent one-on-ones with your key people to dislodging yourself from your office and spending time in the trenches to abandoning your personal growth program. When you neglect these disciplines you diminish your impact as a leader and relegate yourself to a mere administrator or analyst that meekly presides over his organization rather than stretch it and its people.

The bad news is that when you abandon these listed activities, the negative results don't show up over night. In fact, you'd be much better off if the instant you got off track you were cursed with a Michael Moore-sized boil on your backside that didn't go away until you took action. But since that doesn't happen it's easy to keep doing the wrong things until they become a devastating habit.

The second rule of ruts

When you find yourself in a rut, stop digging - and start climbing! In other words, stop doing the stupid things that put you in the rut in the first place and get back to the disciplines necessary to build and sustain results. If you stay in your rut it can turn into a grave. In fact, the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth, width and amount of time you're in it.

Remember that the results you're getting are the results you should be getting and if you want different results you must change what you do.

The third rule of ruts

The seeds to your next rut are often sown during the good times. When are you most likely to abandon training, holding people accountable, making needed changes and decisions and to become isolated in your office spending more time with paperwork than people-work? When business is good! It's during the good times that training just doesn't seem as necessary; that holding people accountable doesn't appear as urgent; that you're more inclined to build a fence around what you have rather than change it; and it's when you're likely to believe you've paid your dues in the trenches and can now retire to the friendly confines of your office to impersonate a real leader. The key to combating the tendency to let up when things are rolling takes acute awareness and fierce discipline. Since you now know that this is when you're most vulnerable to letting up you must make the extra effort to pull yourself and your team through the natural tendency to use success as a permission slip to crawl into a hammock and take a nap.

The fourth rule of ruts

Personal ruts normally precede corporate ruts. The speed of the leader is the speed of the pack and that can be bad news when the boss gets lazy, rusty or just plain complacent. On a recent cruise vacation I was reminded that human beings are not at their best when life is too safe. For seven glorious days I had no appointments, no pressure to perform, no place I had to be and nothing that I had to do. The result? I gained seven pounds in seven days. If I had taken the two week cruise I'd have gotten fat enough to return home and run for sheriff. The lesson? The good times can put you to sleep, personally as well as organizationally, but a personal rut normally precedes a corporate decline. That's exactly why more is expected from leaders than from followers; there is so much more at stake when a leader lets up, loses focus or goes stale. As John Maxwell explains in his Law of Leadership Modeling: The good things a leader does in excess, followers will emulate in moderation. But the bad things a leader does in moderation, followers will emulate in excess. It's the price of leadership and there's no sense whining about it. It's simply the price of your position.

I want to reiterate two keys that will help you avoid ruts: awareness and discipline. Once you become more aware of the pitfalls of ruts and when you're most vulnerable to sowing rut-seeds, you're less likely to aid and abet their emergence. And as you develop the discipline to do the right things every day - not just the days when it's convenient, easy, cheap or popular - you can bulletproof your business and yourself against future declines. It doesn't take brilliance but it does take tenacity.

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