

How to Dig Yourself out of a Rut

By David Brewster

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What do my daughters' bedroom, London's Strand and the personal computer have in common? The answer might help you dig yourself out of that common management rut: the feeling that no matter what you do, nothing is going to improve.

My girls' bedroom is, I guess, like that of most young girls. Beds made in abstract, rather than classical, style. Drawers left half open, having been rifled through for that must-wear pair of Barbie underpants. Floor dotted with discarded, dishevelled looking dolls.

After much hounding to improve standards of tidiness, we have finally realised that standards are unlikely to improve in the next 15 years. So we've reached a sort of unspoken truce. The kids have a sense of just how much mess they can get away with. And we've come to the point I call 'resigned acceptance'.

'Resigned acceptance' is that state of mind we reach when we put a persistent problem into the "too hard" basket. We realise that, while things aren't the way we would like them, correcting the situation is probably not possible. Or at least not worth the effort required.

Another, quite different example of 'resigned acceptance' is the way most of us tend to cope with the inequities of city life. In the Strand in London, the homeless make shelter in the doorways of some of the world's most exclusive stores. For a while I walked down that street every morning. I freely admit that resigned acceptance is the only way I could rationalise this pathetic irony and get on with my day.

Back in the office, 'resigned acceptance' is the way we deal with many of those things which complicate our lives every day. A great example is the way we have come to terms with that productivity tool on our desk: the Windows computer.

Microsoft Windows is now almost 20 years old. Yet still we accept, with resignation, the dreaded frozen screen. We accept that to turn a Windows computer off, we have to go to the 'Start' button first. That help files seldom help. That PCs outlive their usefulness long before they actually wear out.

The big problem with resigned acceptance, particularly in business, is that it often occurs because we haven't found a better way - not because there isn't a better way.

I've known people to spend hundreds of hours maintaining complex spreadsheets because they

didn't know there were simpler options. I've known managers who accept difficult and time consuming procedures because they don't know how to identify and remove complexity. I've known whole departments who accept ridiculous bureaucracy imposed on them because they don't know how to challenge the status quo.

Have a look at your workplace. What examples of 'resigned acceptance' can you find? If you want to get out of a rut, it's time to stop tripping over the office equivalent of the child's toy. Time to tidy up your room and set a new standard for the future.

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