



## Monsters Under the Bed

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

Even though I am a calcified boomer, I can still remember the fear of monsters under my bed. I was fearless when not conscious of a potential for danger, but as soon as my brother would suggest I look under the bed in case there were any monsters there, I would be up for the night. It is amazing how many noises there are in a house when your ears are poised to hear every sound. It can drive you nuts.

So it is in some work environments. As groups become fixated on the potential problems (internal or external), they lose the ability to be objective, and they enter a world of paranoia. A defensive posture emerges that can stifle creative progress.

On the flip side, organizations that play only offense can be blindsided easily by changing conditions brought on by the competition, changes in customer preference, or other external factors. The obvious place to be is a healthy balance where potential problems are anticipated, but the organization flexes its own muscle in an aggressive offensive strategy. Here are some ideas that can facilitate this balance.

### Clarify Your Own Strategy

The companies that consistently win in the marketplace have a product and service pattern that perpetually leaves the competition in a “fast follower” position. Apple Inc. is an excellent example of a company that continually out-innovates the competition and thus enjoys the ability to shape the future marketplace. They do not always win (remember the Newton?), but their batting average is pretty high, and the number of “at bats” is incredible. The powerful combination of brilliant strategic moves and best-in-class product design capability creates an impressive stream of products. I suppose if you are a competitor of Apple, *they* are the monster under the bed.

### Invest in Good Market Intelligence

The ability to “see around corners” is not based on clairvoyance. The roots of excellent anticipation are knowledge and keen instincts. Knowledge involves investing in a continual scan of what everyone else in the market is doing. Here are some examples of just a few of the numerous legitimate ways an organization can distill the essence of major moves by the competition:

- Monitor patent applications.

- Read the annual reports of the competition.
- Keep up with social networking chatter.
- Track the delivery of supplies to the competition.
- Note requests for local ordinance variations.
- Listen to the industry speculation.

Of course, many organizations play dirty and try to use eaves-dropping or other inappropriate methods to gather useful information. Illegal processes eventually give an organization the reputation for having ethical problems, which can directly affect market value. In addition, if employees are encouraged by management to use quasi-illegal tactics, it drains the moral fiber out of the organization, which leads to an ethical dry rot problem that eventually leads to collapse. In the internet age, few things can remain hidden for long.

### **Create Common Goals in Your Team**

The ability to articulate a compelling vision of the future is an essential leadership trait. Once a vision is in place, it is time to enroll every soul in the organization behind it. When teams perform poorly due to conflict, usually it is a result of team members not sharing common goals. They think they are on the same page, but really they are subtly pulling in different directions. If the vision describes a better existence for all people in the organization and it is solidified by consistency from top management, then the common goal created will provide an incredible force for forward progress. I am reminded of the TV segment of a man pulling a giant 727 airplane. Concentrated, persistent force can move large objects.

### **Build Trust**

Without trust on the team, all efforts to excel and avoid the monsters under the bed will produce tepid results. Reason: Low trust means the organization continually has to pay a tax on all interpersonal activities as described by Stephen M.R. Covey in *The Speed of Trust*. When trust is high, it allows the organization to see the dangers clearly and still move forward with courage born of solidarity. Internal monsters have a hard time surviving in a culture of high trust because transparency shines a light of truth to reveal there is nothing under the bed but dust bunnies. The resulting absence of fear means a good night's sleep is possible.

It is important to manage uncertainty with courage and an appropriate level of caution. If the underpinnings of an organization are solid, it can ride the wave of market changes like a surfer; if the foundation is not solid, the organization can be swept under the current of competitive pounding waves and struggle to survive.

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