

Operate Ahead of the Power Curve

By Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

A wise mentor of mine used to have a saying that he often shared with me. He advocated I should “operate ahead of the power curve.” It took me a while to figure out what exactly he meant by that and a lot longer to appreciate how fantastic his advice was. I now try to operate ahead of the power curve always, and it reduces my stress level, improves the quality of my work, makes me less edgy with others, and allows me to display a more professional and controlled image. So, exactly what is this magic advice all about?

The advice is to always do the bulk of the work on a project or assignment immediately so you have it nearly completed well ahead of any due date. Then you can relax and complete the work at a less frantic pace to produce high quality work with very little stress.

I do a lot of university teaching where students are encouraged to write their assignments early in the week. Get the bulk of the writing done at least 1 or 2 days in advance of the due date, then finish up the editing after taking a break. By tricking yourself into thinking the paper is due on Saturday when it is actually really due on Monday, it changes the process dramatically. Now, the student applies significantly more effort early and can relax on Sunday. This improves the quality of student life and also leads to higher quality work. Reason: most students procrastinate until Monday afternoon to even begin writing. Then, they are in a state of panic while trying to concentrate on the organization and technical aspects of the paper. Little interruptions close to the deadline become huge annoyances because they distract the student from an important mission at a critical time. But if the work was already done two days earlier, then a last minute distraction can be accommodated with grace.

In Hollywood, when they make a movie, they have a saying for when the bulk of the movie is completed. They say it is “in the can,” which means the expensive shooting is completed and initial editing is done. What remains is the fine tuning to produce a finished product. This is done at a more leisurely pace, which helps improve the artistic creativity of the finished work.

I do the same thing in my writing and consulting work. For example, I am writing the bulk of this article on Thursday morning. I intend to put it out on my BLOG on Sunday evening, so I will have a draft to refine for 4 days before putting it out. I am doing some leadership consulting with a company in two weeks. I already have my materials organized and packaged up for the event. I will have a chance to soak on the material and make many refinements over the next 14 days and do so at a relaxed pace. That will make a significant difference in the quality of my work.

Let me share a graphic example of how powerful this philosophy can be. Several years ago I was a Division Manager in a large company. There were 4 Divisions in a large unit of the company, and we were told there would be a forced ranking of all our professionals in order to select who would be leaving as a result of a planned RIF. My Division was not the most powerful group, so I realized my people would be at a disadvantage when it came time for the rankings. As soon as I learned the ranking sessions would take place in two weeks, I immediately told all my Department Managers to drop everything for a command performance meeting that afternoon. We went into action immediately to map out a strategy. It became obvious that we did not have enough supporting evidence on the merits or talents of some of our professionals. We established a listing of what things were needed to have at our finger tips during the ranking process and set out to gather that information. It took nearly all of the two weeks but with a few days to spare, we stood back and looked at our organized data base. It was impressive.

Meanwhile, the other 3 Division Managers went on with their daily activities that habitually took up all of the time. They fretted and worried about the upcoming ranking process. The day before the ranking began, these managers hunkered down with select underlings to discuss their people. There was a lot of infighting and bickering among the various sub managers, and things became highly strained. They worked nearly all night frantically trying to get their ducks in a row. Meanwhile my managers and I were able to spend some quality time calmly focusing on our values so we would do the responsible thing the following morning.

During the ranking process, it became obvious that the other three Divisions had not done their homework well and were in a panic while my managers were well rested and ready. Whenever someone from another Division tried to downgrade one of our good people, we had a string of examples and hard data to back up our claims. They had very little documentation and only anecdotal stories as evidence. Finally one individual from the most powerful Division stood up slightly purple with rage. He said, “Whipple, the only reason your people are all coming out on top is because you were more prepared.” He was angry at me for being prepared? For once, I was speechless and said nothing.

You are probably saying to yourself, “How do you get the time to do the work well ahead of deadlines”? It is simply a matter of priority. It can be done if the will is there and the practice has become a habit. The peace of mind gained by having tasks well in hand long before the due date is well worth the early workload. The added benefit of higher quality work makes a huge difference in terms of one’s reputation.

Bob Whipple is CEO of Leadergrow, Inc. an organization dedicated to growing leaders. He can be reached at bwhipple@leadergrow.com 585-392-7763. Website www.leadergrow.com BLOG www.thetrustambassador.com