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## MID-IOWA BUSINESS

# Get out of the office; visit the problem

This past spring, I followed the news regarding the Missouri River flooding along Iowa's western border with more than a passing interest. I knew that in order to shut down an interstate highway, an event was occurring that exceeded the careful calculations completed when the highway was constructed.

What really struck me, however, was the predicted duration of the disaster. As the situation unfolded in early June, forecasts were calling for flooding to persist throughout August and perhaps even until the end of September.

My first reaction was, "How can this be? Someone must have really screwed up managing the flows. And there's no way those duration forecasts can be right. Someone's off a decimal point."

As a native of eastern Iowa, I knew big river flooding. ("Heck, if you think this is bad, you should have seen '65!" is a common refrain in my hometown of Dubuque.)

Then, in late June, Janet



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and I went on a vacation to Yellowstone National Park. From the time we crossed the Missouri River at Chamberlain, S.D., every tributary from the roaring Yellowstone River to the tiniest mountain stream was out of its banks. Furthermore, the snow waiting to join the deluge exceeded anything we had seen in Iowa immediately following the worst February blizzard.

In short, I thought I knew big rivers. But after visiting the actual site, it became obvious that the Missouri and Mississippi rivers are entirely different animals when it comes to their potential for flooding Iowa for an extended period of time. A quick review of maps after returning home confirmed that the Missouri's watershed upstream of Iowa is significantly greater and

includes elevated snowpack. My flooding experience is similar to a trap that frequently claims successful managers and employees. Many attribute career advancement to their ability to resolve a past problem using a perceived unique skill.

It's only natural then, that they continue to look for other instances to utilize their perceived forte. In short, they mistakenly assume the solution successfully applied to a past problem can be effectively extrapolated to every new issue which bears some resemblance.

Financial market literature refers to the tendency of our minds to see a pattern when, in fact, one doesn't exist as extrapolation bias. Abraham Maslow, an American professor of psychology who created Maslow's hierarchy of needs, said, "It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."

Vic, one of my first bosses, perhaps said it best: "When you assume, you make an ass

of u and me."

Given that our human tendencies are working against us, how do we guard against the urge to jump to an inaccurate conclusion or ineffective solution?

First and foremost, get out of the office and visit the site of the issue. Visit firsthand with the people who deal directly with the problem day in and day out. What have they observed? What do they think is going on? View it with your own eyes if at all possible.

The Japanese refer to this as going to the gemba, or the "real place." This is similar to a detective visiting the scene of the crime or my visit to the headwaters of the Missouri.

Be aware that newly minted college graduates, as well as recently promoted shop floor personnel, often feel they've "earned" their office. Make sure they clearly understand they earn their keep by supporting those people who perform the real work of the organization that pays the bills.

Don't exacerbate that ten-

dency with luxurious offices far removed from where the work occurs. "Taj Mahal" offices only benefit the building contractor.

Ensure that your organization embraces a formal problem-solving process to methodically identify and prove the root cause(s) of a well-defined problem, using data whenever possible. Eight Disciplines (8D), A3 and Six Sigma are all proven methodologies which encourage analytic proof rather than shots from the hip.

Finally, develop a culture where it is encouraged to make problems visible rather than sweeping them under the carpet. Little problems ignored, tend to grow into a flood.

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