

Black Holes and Streamliners

By Ron Lutka

Every specialty requires its own quality and character of practitioner. Those who streamline organizations are no exception. They must possess particular attributes to succeed. Do you have what it takes to streamline organizations?

Streamliners are important to the success of any organization because they work to eradicate black holes from organizations. Black holes are defined as:

An area of an organization where there is, unbeknownst to management, an abundance of undesirable activities or a lack of desirable activities, both of which destroy organizations.

The above definition contains three important characteristics:

- 1) damage is occurring to the organization;
- 2) there is an abundance of undesirable activities and lack of desirable activities, not merely an occasional occurrence; and
- 3) management might or might not be aware of the damage occurring to the organization; however, management is definitely unaware of the root cause of the damage.

To eradicate black holes one must be able to search for and discover black hole-creating items. Black holes have defined character and form and an effective streamliner can locate and then eradicate them, eliminating the damage they cause. Because of the elusive nature of black holes, streamliners must possess certain attributes to be successful. The key attributes are discussed below.

Trainable

There is plenty of room for streamliners to be creative and apply their vast experience and education when helping organizations; however, the area of search and discovery needs to be highly standardized because black hole-creating items are elusive and must be detected before they can be eradicated. Therefore, streamliners must be trainable and willing to follow a proven process. A solid understanding of the nature of black holes, as discussed in my book titled *Black Holes in Organizations*, will apprise readers of this necessity. Identifying and eliminating black hole-creating items requires the use of technology, but not in the Information Technology sense of the word. The same known action applied in the same degree to the same situation in the same environment will yield the same result. That is technology. Technology reduces risk and increases predictability. A sound search and discovery technology applied by a well-trained streamliner will unearth numerous black hole-creating items. And finding them is the first step in eradicating them.

Analytical

Streamliners must have analytical abilities. Analytical abilities help the streamliner understand business controls, business processes, spreadsheets, standards, similarities and differences and the interconnectedness between them. For instance, how a problem in purchasing is causing a problem in shipping can be identified and resolved by an analytical mind.

Additionally, analysis is required to identify necessary repairs. After repairs have been performed, analysis is required to understand if the repairs have produced the desired result.

Methodical

Black holes are elusive and it requires a systematic approach to search for and discover

black hole-creating items. The application of systematic processes requires that the streamliner be methodical. A precise, methodical approach is also required to repair the damage black holes cause.

Staying within pre-determined guidelines gained from on-site experience will shorten the black hole eradication process and increase the likelihood of success for both the streamliner and the organization.

Focused

Streamliners need to “burn holes” in problems plaguing organizations. If a streamliner cannot remain focused he will not be able to penetrate the organization to a sufficient depth to identify and terminate chronic problems.

Increasing the selling price of products is a solution to low margins or cash flow problems. However, it might only be a temporary solution. The further deterioration of organizational functionality, due to black holes, will continue to increase costs and decrease margins or erode cash flow. Conversely, a focused streamliner might discover the root causes that lead to the problems.

For instance, insufficient dry times could cause lacquered fixtures to blister in the field, which in turn increases returns and reduces margins. Cost reduction opportunities may be missed in shipping if products are improperly loaded and are damaged in transit. An ineffective storehouse stock management system may drive up production costs. If no one collects rent for three months from the company’s franchised restaurants, cash flow will suffer.

Time Conscious

The streamlining process involves searching for, then eradicating, numerous failures of basic activities. Basic activities as a class are high in number, detailed, and often repetitive. Locating and eradicating failures requires time and attention. Therefore, of necessity, streamliners must be time conscious and must pay attention to details. They must work hard and minimize idle chatter that eats up valuable search and discovery time or time that can be spent performing repairs.

Management is accustomed to big picture quick fixes, where the impact is readily visible. This is not the nature of eradicating black holes. Black holes are discovered and repaired on a gradient, with smaller gains usually occurring early on and larger gains occurring later in the process. With that in mind, streamliners must be time conscious and work in a diligent manner so the pace of gains meets management’s overall expectations.

Persistent

Tracking down the root causes of significant problems plaguing an organization requires persistence—especially when one is unearthing root causes that management is unaware of. Black holes, where many of these root causes reside, are complex balls of confusion. A methodical and persistent approach is the only way to work through issues caused by black holes.

The resolution of deeply-rooted, complex issues requires slogging through the mud with a determined effort. It takes a special breed to

be willing to take on this challenge and see it through to completion. Unfortunately, many people give up when persistence is most needed—when they are 95 percent into the issue and need to dig a bit deeper or push a tad harder to solve it.

With knowledge comes responsibility and it falls upon the shoulders of the streamliner to persist until the problem is solved. I am continually surprised at the number of people, at all levels within organizations, who expend intellectual muscle and come close to resolution but fail to complete the task. A streamliner cannot afford to fail. Not resolving deeply rooted problems can break organizations; resolving them can make organizations.

Strong Desire to Help

A strong desire to help is likely the most powerful attribute a streamliner can possess. There may be many forces working against the streamliner that needs to be overcome to eradicate black holes. It is doubtful a streamliner can succeed on a project, let alone as a career streamliner, if he does not possess a strong desire to help.

The desire to help can unleash tremendous abilities in most of us. Many examples exist of people performing heroic feats, such as single-handedly lifting an automobile off a person trapped beneath it or diving into frigid waters to save the occupant trapped inside a van. Streamliners can take extraordinary ac-

tions to help executives, departments or organizations. For instance, one streamliner spent most of a cold winter in a non-insulated, rodent-infested barn searching for documents that could save a company. Streamliners might work seventy hours per week to get to the root of problems and to give the executive team a fighting chance to save a company. At the same time, a streamliner might simply point out that a company is loaded with over-the-counter derivatives containing tremendous counter-party risk and which do not have a transparent and liquid market. All of this is motivated by a strong desire to help. For some, this desire is more than a job. It is a significant facet of life.

Conclusion

The attributes outlined here are powerful, even on their own. Together, in one person, these attributes add up to an effective streamliner. Effective streamliners are an organization’s best chance to have implemented a proper search-discovery-repair process leading to the eradication of black holes. And the eradication of black holes will help the organization survive and thrive.

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