

The Lion Tamer Metaphor & SAM

By Mickey Straub

Question: What does a Lion Tamer bring with him inside the ring?

Answer: A whip and a chair.

Question: The reason for the whip is obvious, but why does he bring the chair?

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A few years back, the film-maker Errol Morris made a fascinating documentary called Fast, Cheap & Out of Control, in which a lion tamer explains that he brandishes a chair at an enraged big cat to confuse it and dissipate its anger.

The animal is biologically programmed to focus on one thing and then attack it. When the lion tamer holds up a chair, the big cat sees four things and all of a sudden, he has four points of interest-the four legs of the chair-and doesn't know which one to focus its anger. The lion has a one track mind. He loses his original train of thought and gets completely distracted, which dissipates the rage. It's basically animal psychology.

How does it apply to activity management?

A lot can be learned from this metaphor because human beings have the same tendency to get overwhelmed and distracted if we have too many things to focus on. And when it comes to activity management, too many targets may get us off track.

For example, I know of one office that manages and measures ten activity categories, but the primary emphasis is on one category...getting twelve appointments per week. That is the ultimate target. Another agency uses points, which is a good way of bringing weighted activities under one umbrella. Still another stresses 3-3's which stands for three appointments seen and scheduled plus three referrals per day.

The use of specific metrics is used across many industries. I know of a hospital's urgent care department that closely measures and monitors what they call LOS, which is the Length of Stay experienced by each patient from the time they enter and leave the facility. After Lance Armstrong's bout with cancer, he narrowed his focus to things like pulse rate and pedal cadence. Walgreen's focuses primarily on one metric, "Average profit per customer visit" and Motorola is famous for their process management system around "Six Sigma." And Jack Palance had a similar message in the movie called, City Slickers, when Billy Crystal asked him for the secret of life. Holding up his index finger, Jack said, "The Secret of Life...is just one thing. You have to figure it out."

Be sure to have one common target or measurable theme for everyone to focus on, and I'm not just referring to some type of recognition or award, but a specific metric. Co-create one mantra that is constantly repeated and that will give a uniform direction. Similar to a lion, human beings benefit from a singular focus, but whatever it is, you have to figure it out.



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