



The Problem

Unexpectedly called into the GM's office at a company I was training in *Cert IV in Competitive Manufacturing*, I was presented with their dilemma. The 30 person company was on credit hold with all of their major suppliers, they were unable to meet their customer demands, and orders were being cancelled every day. This company was about to go out of business.

Focus on the levers

The management team felt totally deflated and powerless. There were so many things that they felt had gone wrong and they could not see where to begin to get out of the mess. The staff continued to work happily as they were unaware that the business was in so much trouble. Management were trying to "protect" the staff from worry.

And there is the problem. You can't solve a problem if you don't know you have one. After some discussion the GM agreed to tell the team that morning at an all hands meeting.

To her surprise most already knew. They wanted to help. They were just as passionate about the business success as the management team.

While at the staff meeting I grabbed a whiteboard and started an *Ishikawa (fishbone)* diagram and we started *brainstorming*. This allowed everyone together to break down the things that were contributing to the credit hold problem; what they saw as the biggest impediment to quickly getting back on their feet.

After only about 40 minutes we had produced about 75 things that were creating the difficulty. Truthfully, everyone felt a bit more overwhelmed than before, but they now felt it together.



That's a good thing!

Our Conclusion

Protecting your staff from "scary" news is seldom a successful approach. Collaborate with the people who deal with your business every day and you will seldom be disappointed with the outcome. Any complicated problem is typically a system of small, simple levers if you break it down. When things seem overwhelming, focus not on the big problem. Look at the small levers that contribute and work on those first. The positive feeling of accomplishing something as a team, with direction that adds value, is what drives success in the end.

There is always something you can do



I asked the group if there was any one of those 75 things that they could change right now. Without knowing whether it would make a significant difference, would they be able to act on it.

After some silence one of the admin assistants quietly spoke up from the back of the room with a suggestion. The whole room looked at her, then someone nodded. We were away!

It took another 2 hours to go through the full list but in the end we had 6 more levers that the team had complete control over and could change right away.

The mood in the room had gone from overwhelmed to hopeful and determined. The business had actions that were clear, that everyone could see contributed to their shared *strategic objectives* and they could see that they could succeed at completing.

Within 1 week the company was able to work with their suppliers and demonstrate that they were now viable again. Credit holds were released for critical components and customer orders were able to be processed. Over the next two months all holds were released and the business was once again performing well.

Perhaps more satisfying, information on company performance were now shared with all staff and *Kaizen (rapid improvement)* events involving everyone were now adopted as part of company culture. Everyone felt they could contribute.