

Volume	3	Starting a Company
Chapter	04	Beginning Execution
Section	03	Performance Pressure
Key Word	Reacting, Responding	
Tags		
Stage	Having some operational issues	

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

File No. 3.040301 | 2017-06-01

Quick Summary: Do not try to control situations; instead, choose how to respond, not react.

Abstract:

Every day and almost every hour brings on new, unexpected challenges. Things always seem to go wrong. Accept the fact that exceptions are the norm and develop a prioritization methodology to address them to avoid knee-jerk reactions.

The full title of this article should be extended to “When Things Go Wrong - and They Will” to accurately reflect the reality of the day-to-day operation of any company. For startups, it can seem that the crisis du jour becomes the crisis per hour. After funding occurs or when you really start running the business, all of the tasks that need to be performed seem to come at you and your meager or non-existent staff all at once. All issues seem to cry out to be your number one priority. The title of this book “Easy to Start, Hard to Run” and the article in this series “Everything is Easy Until You Start” acknowledge that things will go wrong; you can count on it!

The best way to handle these exceptions is to consider them the norm. In fact, when things go right, it will be the exception! The best way to address these situations is to realize that even as the CEO, you are not in control. Instead of trying to control the situation, focus on how you will choose to respond to it. When you receive the email, the phone call, or when someone comes bursting into your office with the apparent crisis, follow a simple method to help you stay in control.

First, count to 100 by seventeens (17, 34, 51...). That exercise will force you to slow down for a few seconds. When you get good at counting by seventeens, pick another prime number and do the same thing.

Second, ask one question: “Is this issue fatal to the business now?”. If it truly is, drop what you are doing and respond.

Third, if not fatal, ask another question: “Who is best equipped to handle this issue besides me?”. At first, as a lone entrepreneur or in a very small organization, you may be the only available person.

Fourth, ask: “How does this issue compare in importance to all of the other issues we are dealing with at this moment, and how should it be prioritized?”.

The issue prioritization process is by far the hardest step to take, but it is also the most important. Without a conscious effort, the newest issue will seem like the most important issue, which should probably not be the case. If you end up with three number-one priorities, you have really ended up with three number three's and no number one's. You and your organization will quickly begin to thrash, lose perspective, and probably start making bad decisions due to a lack of concentrated thought.

Although it is contrary to most people's inclination, it may be better to consciously proceed with stopgap solutions rather than attempting to solve the issue once and for all. The key point to this approach is the consciousness of the decision to proceed with an interim solution. It is a way of buying time. Referring to it as a band-aid solution has a negative connotation, but it may be the appropriate response. The band-aid can hide the wound and keep it from becoming worse. Obviously, a band-aid won't stop the major bleeding from an artery; the interim solution approach will not solve a short-term fatal problem. Whether you proceed with an interim solution or a long-term method of eliminating the problem, you have to realize that ignoring the problem will not make it go away. Problems are not like fine wine; they do not improve with age, instead, they quickly sour.

The key to success in dealing with ever-present issues is to develop a methodology and then a culture of accepting the fact that problems are the norm. A systematic approach that involves prioritization is the best way of dealing with them. Avoid the new corporate dance, the Knee-Jerk, brought on by the instant reaction expectation of the Internet. Respond, do not react.