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STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN

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Quick Summary: Taking a deep breath implies stopping for a moment to think, not filling up the lungs to scream.

Abstract:

We often hear the phrase, “take a deep breath.” It implies slow down, step back, and think about what you will say or do. Unfortunately, in many instances, in response to a surprise adverse event, individuals take a deep breath to yell loudly and long. If this occurs, put your fingers in your ears to avoid being caught up in the noise, and then logically stop, look, and listen to find out what is behind the noise.

In our early years, our moms and dads, while holding our hands, warned us to stop, look, and listen before we crossed the street. The danger was obvious, as were the potential consequences. The benefits of the minor delay and the actions taken during that period were a small price to minimize the risk of being run over. It is hard to imagine that those split seconds impacted the outcome of our journey to offset the risk. Unfortunately, it is easy not to apply this simple lesson when confronted with an unexpected business issue. In today’s fast-paced business environment, we often feel obligated to move quickly, ignoring the simple stop, look, and listen principle we grew up with. The “Knee Jerk” has become the new corporate dance.

As discussed in the article in this collection, “When Things Go Wrong,” a simple four-step process can help you address the first portion of the stop, look, and listen advice. When an unexpected event is brought to your attention:

- First: Count to 100 by seventeens; 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. Independent of the answer to the “who is the best person?” question, ask one more question.
- 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?”

This simple process will set the stage for the second step, “look.” In this activity, look deeper than the snippet or brief description of the issue brought to your attention. Look deeper. Ask questions such as:

1. When we did first hear about this issue?
2. How long has it lingered before we knew about it?
3. Who does it impact?
4. Will it or does it impact others?
5. What is the requested action that we have been asked to do?
6. From what we know now, is the requested action reasonable, and does it truly address the fundamental issue?

These six simple questions will undoubtedly lead to others. They are not meant to start “analysis paralysis.” Instead, they are intended to accurately frame the situation and lay the groundwork for an appropriate response to the real issue that may or may not be what was reported.

As individuals begin to answer the questions, carefully listen. It is more important to listen to what they do not say than it is to listen to what is said. In many cases, the first response to any of the questions can be defensive or one of denial. Answers such as “It’s in the manual,” “The customer didn’t listen,” or “It works as designed” are common knee-jerk responses. As discussed in the article, [A Simple Definition of a Defect,](#) there is no value in discussing whether the issue is a defect. Instead, follow the definition that a defect is any deviation from a customer’s expectation. The customer can be anyone from a fellow employee, a business partner, or an actual end-user customer.

The listening phase may take time. It may involve bringing others into the response circle or obtaining more details about the reported issue. Actions and responses, however, do not have to occur in serial or sequential order. In fact, an immediate response is usually the best practice. That response does not have to address the issue or provide a solution. The response is very simple, such as, “We have listened, and we have heard you.” That simple statement should be followed up with another comment that states when the next update will occur. Note that the commitment made is for the next update, not necessarily the solution itself. In most cases, this simple technique will de-escalate the situation. It shows that you have stopped and given the situation some attention; you have looked into the situation, at least on a preliminary basis, and you have listened and accepted the fact that something needs to be addressed. When people sense that you have listened and they have been heard, they can be remarkably patient and understanding. Take the time to follow your mom or dad’s advice, and avoid the easily avoidable accident.

As one final word of caution, if you make a time commitment for the next update, never miss it. Even if the only update is that you do not have an update, by all means, keep the commitment. If you don’t provide the update, you will be sending a very loud and clear message that you do not care and cannot be trusted. Once this breach of faith has occurred, it will be extremely hard, perhaps impossible, to restore trust.