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## ▶ **Five Days of the Fish**



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*A dead fish begins to smell bad on the second day after it dies; we say something stinks like three-day-old fish. Business problems are a lot like dead fish. Typically, people perceive them only when they start to stink -- i.e., after they have been incubating for some time. Very often, managers like you and me are asked to jump in and "fix" such problems, either internally or for our customers. Because in most "rotting-fish" situations time is of the essence, I would like to offer some guidance, in allegorical form, to help other "fixers" analyze and resolve these crises.*

Let's imagine an exotic fish market, where fish are kept alive in a display tank until just before they are sold, so that they can be eaten when fresh. Needless to say, the store has high prices, high overhead, and low volume, leading to very thin profit margins.

This market has in its employ a small but very vocal group of Cassandras who periodically announce that a fish is about to die, although all the fish are cruising around the tank as usual. This group consists of:

- Employees who don't have enough to do and are always looking for things that are not quite right. Like Nostradamus, they are never taken to task if their predictions don't come true. They therefore predict all kinds of things with great abandon, hitting it right every once in awhile just because of statistical probability. The signal-to-noise ratio for these people is very low, so usually the owner can safely ignore them.
- A few individuals who actually *can* see what's coming and aren't afraid to vocalize about it. Provided that the owner can distinguish these folks from the first subgroup, they can be useful to him, but they are not always right, either.

### **Day One: Unaware**

That very week, a fish *does* die, but very few people take notice. One or two clueless employees poke around and discuss what tests they might perform to decide if it is normal for fish to float on the top of the tank. Later, they will remark that they suspected something was wrong but weren't sure.

## Day Two: Avoiding the Issue



The following day, more people perceive that something is wrong, although some speculate that the fish is just tired. There is not yet enough stink in the air to arouse them to action. Although customer traffic has dropped off a bit, the head clerk delays telling the owner, who is notorious for flying into a rage upon receipt of bad news.

## Day Three: Enter "The Fixer"

Some time during the third day, when the dead fish really begins to smell, the clerk finally summons the owner, who, in turn, calls in an outside specialist. This "fixer" arrives on the scene and pronounces the fish legally dead. The owner, in complete denial, scolds the fixer for not employing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. When the fixer points out the futility of such an action, citing the fish's odor, the owner then commands him to "fix the fish problem."

What does this mean? Banishing the odor and/or keeping any more fish in the tank from dying? Working with suppliers to get healthier fish in the first place? Finding someone who wants to buy the dead, putrefying fish? All of the above? Knowing that the owner does not yet know what he wants -- and that his idea of "fix" will probably change a few times before the fixer is done -- the fixer rolls up his sleeves and gets to work. In the meantime, business continues to fall off.

No one can ignore the odor, and customers are staying away. Rumors spread throughout the store that many fish have died and were surreptitiously thrown away. The Cassandras are abuzz with "I told you so," and employees are putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the dead fish. The owner assures everyone that the fixer is working on the problem, and will soon have a solution.



Meanwhile, the fixer is up to his elbows in stinking fish guts, feeling dirty, lonely, and desperate. The owner tells him what a prince he is. Aware that this is not the first time he has been called in on a "dead fish" problem, the fixer is mildly upset and concerned about the extent to which he is being "managed," but knows that to be successful he must keep his head down and solve the problem.

## Day Four: The Turning Point

By day four, the stench is so bad that the employees are clamoring for the

fixer's head. Some even blame him for the fish's death. Moreover, the health department arrives and threatens to close the store, sending the owner into a full panic.



The fixer is prepared for all of this. He knows that day four is his moment of truth -- the get-rolling-or-smell-horrible-forever day. That is why he wasted no time trying to resuscitate the dead fish on day three, knowing from experience that he would need time to examine the entrails and formulate a solution. Today, he can legitimately announce the solution, begin implementation, and start calming everyone down.

He makes no attempt to control the odor (focus on PR) yet, understanding that doing so before a true solution is underway would invite catastrophe. Privately, the fixer thanks his lucky stars that the remaining fish appear to be hanging in there, because another dead fish at this point could push the whole thing over the cliff.

## **Day Five: Two Critical Paths**

Day five is as critical as day four. It has been a long time since the fish died. Employees cannot bear the smell any longer, and the fixer knows that if it doesn't disappear quickly, things will take a dramatic turn for the worse. So he divides his efforts between two tasks: resolving the problem and getting rid of the odor. The fixer must balance the two tasks carefully. If he neglects his problem-solving work, more fish may die. If he ignores the odor, the owner might mistakenly interpret the ongoing stench as a lack of progress and jettison the fixer's proposed solution -- tossing the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak.

In addition to working on these tasks, the fixer also urges the owner to offer the remaining fish at half price, even though there is absolutely nothing wrong with them. With this incentive, many new customers drop in and purchase fish, despite the lingering odor. These people leave feeling self-satisfied with their business and culinary acumen. Some established customers, however, adopt a wait-and-see attitude, wanting to be sure that the rest of the fish are not diseased before they eat one.

If the fixer can survive day five, things will get better. Both employees and customers will quickly forget about the problem, and he can finish resolving it without all the pressure. He will succeed by making steady, regular progress and ensuring that no new fish die on his watch. Until the problem is fully resolved, ongoing vigilance is critical.



## **Moral of the Story**

Fixers of the world, remember that in a crisis you have three days to prove yourself:

- Fish start to stink on day two, but you will rarely be called that early.
- Don't waste day three fooling around. Open up the fish and conceive a plan. The stink will be bad, and it will get worse.
- Announce your plan and begin executing it on day four.
- Devote day five to working on the problem *and* eliminating the odor.

Good luck! Work on keeping your fish alive, and may all your dead fish be little ones.

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