Business Lifecycle Management Is A Natural Process

Business management is an area that, like most things, has seen its share of trends. In a quest to do it better, there always seems to be something fresh. But in reality, as ancient wisdom says, "there's nothing new under the sun." Old ideas are eventually rediscovered, and often found to have been pretty effective. We wonder why they were abandoned. We dust them off, call them new, and try them again.

While the discipline of business management dates back before Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* published in 1778, in many ways, management education only recently emerged from its dark ages. For generations, the study of management consisted of interviewing successful managers and asking them how they got rich. If you've ever talked with a successful entrepreneur about how he or she succeeded, you know it can be a futile attempt to find the actual truth amid hubris.
The era of the guru finally waned, as four conversation strings emerged in terms of how to improve business performance:

- The first was all about **environmental scanning**, getting a better understanding of the market, the customer and anticipating competition.
- The second was about **making better decisions**, handling strategic planning, and setting more-rational goals for the organization.
- The third was about improving **business processes** to generate new efficiencies, codify best practices and reduce rework.
- The fourth string was all about creating more **skilled and motivated employees** – taking time to learn.

Then, along came Dr. Robert Quinn at the University of Michigan (along with some of his graduate students), who saw these four conversations as more than the running themes in management. Quinn first saw them as four competing quadrants along two axes, one measuring internal versus external focus, and the other representing flexibility versus control. Together, they summarize four key themes for business management. However, opposite quadrants were diametrically opposed to one another, which pointed to the difficulty of managing areas of focus that are paradoxical in business. You can't be focused externally on customers while you re-engineer manufacturing. You'll burn out.

What's most interesting about the quadrants are their direct relationship to the four stages of project management – "Transform, Perform, Conform, and Reform," better known by software developers as "Build, Run, Scale, and Revise." Thus, the four quadrants are also four stages in a business cycle – a one-size fits all cycle that can apply to just about anything in business where the word "lifecycle" is today deployed – from the marketing lifecycle to closing a sale to managing crisis communication. They key is to rotate focus rather than to keep a constant eye on everything.

Example: When a new company is formed, the focus is first whether there is a market for the envisioned product. The entrepreneurs put together a basic concept of the company -- how it will produce a product or service and go to market. From the point it begins operation, the biggest concern is spurring growth, making sales and attracting more investors. Then, as the company matures and gains real competitors, it may begin to look within itself to cut costs from its processes, and streamline both the product design and production. A company obsessed in this third stage can put itself out of business unless it recognizes the need to consider what it has learned and go back to the market with a new product.

So this cutting edge look at business lifecycle management may sound like a real breakthrough in business understanding, but there is documentation that this concept goes back even before Adam Smith by approximately two hundred years, to the early development of the printing press in Germany. How so? It's the forerunner of the weekly desktop calendar, but before they invented staples. We know it today as a deck of cards. It has 52 cards, representing the number of weeks in a year, divided into four suits representing the four seasons in an agricultural society. The 12 picture cards represent the monthly moons.

- **Spring** is the time of love and reproduction; when farmers plan and then plant their fields, thus the symbol is the heart.
- **Summer** is the time when crops grew, but it was also the time for battle. Thus the club, a weapon, was the symbol. It probably sold better than a watering can.
- **Fall** was a time of wealth thanks to the harvest and sale (processing) of crops, and was thus symbolized by the diamond.
- **Winter** was a time when many people died, and the spade or shovel became the symbol. Originally it was the acorn, which symbolized the seed or hope for new growth come springtime. It was just less dramatic than death – a frequent theme in early literature, and these folks were out to sell calendars.

So in the quest to better understand and manage business some old ideas have been rediscovered in a more scientific sense. By following the four phases of management, a pretty good manager can become a truly seasoned leader.