

Kathleen Peterson
PowerHouse Consulting

"Flying by the seat of your pants" is an expression coined by World War II fliers. It was used to describe flying when instruments were not working or when weather interfered with visibility. This expression also applies to a particular "management style" engaged in by many contact center leaders. However, let's not limit this style to only one business unit or industry since it appears to be quite popular.

Some folks identify with this expression immediately… usually those on the receiving end of a senior management style of "flying by the seat of their pants." Characteristics of this behavior include short-term thinking, objectives set without operational requirements being identified, unstable decision making, and legitimate risk factors being tagged as "obstacles" (that is, you must not be a "team player," if you are among those pointing out the shortcomings of the initiative). The result is constant change related to processes, routines and activities… to name just a few.

The general result of "flying by the seat of your pants" management is overall *chaos* and *frenzy*. Those in the throes of the behavior often do not equate their internal management shenanigans with a flawed approach; they simply see it as "just the way it is!" And so it remains. But the impact is very visible at the operational level where the reality is, "find a way to make it happen."

A situational analysis of these environments yields a glimpse of some of the drivers for "flying by the seat of your pants" management. When Sales is competing on "price," yet the brand promises "quality," Operations is expected to fix it. When Sales overpromises, Operations is expected to fix it. When Procurement and Supply Chain practices are out of alignment with the brand's promise, shoddy goods carry the brand, and Operations is left to deal with the customer blowback. When Technology acquisitions are made without requirements being properly vetted by the actual user community, Operations is expected to "make it work."

When Project Management practices are allowed to be casual; poorly documented; without executive leadership; and void of even the most fundamental set of documented tasks, milestones, dependencies and deadlines, Operations "must deal with it" and with the associated customer experiences impacted by poor practices. When Marketing lives in a world by itself, generating all manner of promotions and campaigns, unbeknownst to their crossfunctional operational partners, Operations must "deal with it."I suppose the list could go on and on, but you get the picture.

Do you feel frenzied? Is chaos ruling your operation? These may be difficult questions since frenzy and chaos are often the norm, rather than the exception. Where others may define the behavior as "flying by the seat of your pants," some leaders shrug with the enthusiasm of the downtrodden.

What to do? First, let's recognize that when first introduced to the masses, this expression was indicative of a "temporary" condition due to weather (can't see) or mechanical failure (instruments don't work). The fundamental difference between the origin of the expression and its use today is that organizations led by leaders "flying by the seat of their pants" are not likely dealing with a temporary condition. Sadly, it is more likely the normal state of affairs.

There is a way out! First and foremost, leaders must recognize that the condition exists and is flawed. This is really the hardest step because, without this recognition, nothing will change. Self-assessment is the No. 1 task in moving toward a less chaotic environment. To successfully assess a situation or environment it is critical to establish some criteria by which to measure. Collect whatever is available regarding the company's mission, vision, strategy, brand, customer expectations, etc. Establish a clear picture of what the organization is trying to accomplish in order to establish a baseline by which to measure operational elements associated with enterprise objectives.

Next, take a look at your own business unit and how it is aligned to strategic objectives. CHALLENGE yourself to identify one, two or three situations impacted by crossfunctional or other corporate conditions or communication practices contributing to the chaos of "flying by the seat of your pants." Lastly, step back and wonder, "What can I (we) do to make this better?" Think about how the identified situation has been dealt with to date. Do we all just continue to be silent and "deal with it?" (Sadly, this is the most common practice. Silence is avoidance. As long as we all avoid simultaneously, we collectively convince ourselves that this is "just the way it is.")

To break the cycle requires *intellectual curiosity.* Even if we can't "fix it," there are always elements that fascinate and teach. So just think about the "flying by the seat of your pants" condition and be honest about your current state. Demand more of yourself in terms of creativity when it comes to situational analysis and create a strong, firm, operational voice to pilot the transition.

Kathleen Peterson is the Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, a call center and telecommunications consulting firm.

✉ kpeterson@powerhouse1.com
☎ (800) 449-9904