

Escaping the ITSM quicksand

Do you remember what your life was like before you got a handle on managing the day to day trials of running an IT support function? Well many people are still there. Struggling to escape the python-like grip of the reactive break-fix mind set. Flailing against an organisation that doesn't recognise there even is a problem, let alone the need for change. Desperate to keep their heads above the surface for fear of disappearing forever. Working harder and harder but sinking further and further. For those of you who remember, I need not tell you of the pains and stress associated with the seemingly inescapable situation. For those of you who have forgotten, or repressed, the painful memories of the fight then I can offer nothing more than that silent knowing nod that only people who have shared adversity can exchange. And for those that have never suffered... Well you have never suffered and are unlikely to ever truly understand. Compassion is one thing, empathy is another.

The problem with quicksand...

Quicksand is cool stuff. It doesn't have to be sand at all; any mix of sand and/or another type of grainy soil will do the job. Quicksand can be any form of solid ground that has been saturated with water to reach a semi-liquid state. The phrase "quick" refers to how easily the sand shifts when in this form. In essence, quicksand is nothing more than a highly viscous soupy mixture of sand and water that typically has a density of approximately 2 g/cm^3 . Quicksand occurs when water saturates an area of loose sand that is then agitated. Underground streams or springs, earth tremors, mechanical sources of vibration and localised current flows can all help provide the conditions needed for it to form. When sufficient volumes of water are confined with sand and/or granular matter in a localised pocket formed by local geological conditions and an appropriate source of agitation is present, it creates liquefied soil that can no longer support weight.

Contrary to Hollywood myth, quicksand does not suck its victims down. When stuck in quicksand, it is the thrashing around of the victim themselves that agitates the sandy soup mix close to them, thereby reducing the local viscosity, allowing the poor unfortunate soul to literally dig themselves in deeper. Given that the density of a human being is approximately 1 g/cm^3 it is unlikely that you will drown in it unless you have had the misfortune of landing in it head first! So it is important to remember that whilst it probably won't kill you, it will stop you moving forwards. In fact, it will stop you moving in any direction. And there is the rub. More often than not, it's not the quicksand that kills you, it's the approaching tide (or indeed, hungry carnivore) that it prevents you from escaping that finishes the job.

Tell tale signs that you are in IT up to your neck...

One would imagine that the uncomfortable feeling of grit in your smalls would be enough, but failing that, here are some things to look for if you believe that you may be losing, or indeed may have already lost, control:

- You think you may have developed tinnitus but realise it's just that the service desk phone never stops ringing
- Cost are spiralling upwards and productivity is plunging downwards with little likelihood of any reversal of fortune on the horizon
- Service desk personnel have grown skin as thick as rhino hide to deflect the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and unhappy users
- Those unable to develop an impermeable barrier to snide user comments and sarcasm soon leave the fray as broken gibbering wrecks

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- Things regularly go bump in the night... Maybe it's the ghost in the machine or maybe it's just some maverick coder or system administrator unleashing their latest effort without going through a formal change process
- Sticky plaster workarounds are applied on top of sticky plaster workarounds, bloating the infrastructure unnecessarily and opening the door to serious or potentially lethal virus infections.
- The jungle drums have a nasty habit of confusing the issue and relaying potentially useful information just a little too late for it to be of use
- Proactive systems maintenance aimed at outage prediction and avoidance is a distant concept that sounds like it could be useful, if only you had the time to look into it

OK. So you accept that you may have a problem. Excellent. The path to solid ground awaits, but before you begin, a brief word about the common obstacles to a successful escape bid.

What not to do...

Given your situation, Corporal Jones would be running about like the proverbial shouting "Don't panic Mr Mannering!". What Jones really needed was a firm hand to take him to one side and explain that his outbursts were unnecessary, counter productive and weren't at all good for the morale of his comrades. And if that didn't work maybe a slap to the face would suffice. Above all, you must remain calm. Panic has its place. It helps with the natural production of adrenalin, but it also causes irrational behaviour too. It is always far better to take a step back (difficult when you're up to your waist in quicksand I know) and look at the situation calmly and logically.

There is also a natural tendency to pin ones hopes on a magical pill or wonder tool that will make it all better. Alas, such remedies seldom do little for anyone except for the wealth of those peddling them. Stretching for the winch when there is a branch already within reach is a common way of diverting attention from the current short term objective and ending up with a weighty toolset that you may end up having to drag out of the mire behind you. Such diversions may also cause you to forget about the tools and skills you already have meaning that you don't leverage your full capability in your escape bid. It should also be remembered that relying on mechanical aids to haul you out has additional risks associated with it. Sure they will drag you out by hook or by crook, but they could very well rip you in half (or dislocate your shoulders at the very least) in the process.

If panic and wishful thinking don't get you, then paralysis due to fear just might. Paralysis is sometimes caused by the fear of failure, but given your current predicament could things really get any worse? Surely it is better to fail again and again whilst trying to escape rather than to accept your fate and roll over? Assuming that you are up for the fight then it is important to avoid the last common barrier to success. It is all too easy to mistake activity for progress. Some people are happy to spin their wheels for their whole lives without getting anywhere... These folks sap valuable resources and always miss out on the journey. They are best given a wide berth so that the only person they cake in mud is themselves.

So, how can you escape the clutches of the ITSM quicksand? A plan more cunning than a fox who's just been appointed Professor of Cunning at Oxford University is required and for

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that we may need to enlist the services of either Private Baldrick or Squadron Leader Bartlett...

The (great) escape plan...

“A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week.”

George S. Patton
US General (1885-1945)

When General Patton talked of the differences between a good plan and a perfect plan he was not concerned over the relative merits of the details. No. Instead, he was keen to emphasise the need to move forward and make progress - as some progress, irrespective of how much, is always preferable to the alternative. So without further ado, I give you one version of a way forward:

- Take a moment to lie back, regroup and prepare for the journey

Escaping the current situation is going to take considerable physical and mental effort. Better to be well rested, with your reserves topped up and ready for the fight ahead. And remember, if you lie back and relax you will float!

- Remain calm, determine the best route out and stick to it

Planning is key. However, planning for the sake of planning must be avoided. Making your plans actionable must be the primary goal. You would be well advised to bear in mind the age old adage “Planning without action is futile, action without planning is fatal!”

- Accept that getting out means getting your hands dirty, and probably your hair, and your face too...

Extricating yourself and your team from your current predicament is not something that can be delegated or done as a pet project every second Tuesday afternoon. You must take personal responsibility for the escape attempt and you must participate fully if it is to have any chance of success.

- Employ rapid small scale tactical activities to free up space and resources to make the bigger strategic moves you need

There is seldom any real gain without pain and it is important to recognise that you and your team will have to give of yourselves if you are to break free. This may involve additional overtime, working weekends to clear backlogs, performing mundane tasks below your pay grade and a host of other short term efforts in order to free up your most valuable asset – time. Time that is desperately needed to implement the process and procedural changes that you need to break the repetitive cycle.

- Make slow deliberate smooth movements until you are finally free

Incremental improvements are eminently more palatable, and sustainable, than a complete systemic overhaul to a world weary support team. However, you must be sure to position all such changes within the bigger picture to enable the team to understand the context and importance of such changes.

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- Reduce pressure points by spreading the load and increasing contact area

Leveraging your back office experts in front line customer facing roles not only helps to reduce backlogs, it may also go some way to improving the level of service delivered and help your team understand the needs of their customers more accurately. It is also possible that these overtly technical resources may identify novel and innovative permanent solutions to some of the more repetitive issues thereby reducing the number of incidents reported going forward.

- Identify reachable goals and grab them with both hands

Cherish every success, no matter how minor, and be sure to let everyone who has contributed to the achievement know about the results of their labours. Positive affirmation of the rightness of the current course of action is critical to ensure that the personal sacrifices being made by you and your team are regarded as worthwhile.

- Enlist the help of others, but be sure not to drag them in too

Take advantage of any and all offers of support and assistance but be careful not to inadvertently place your benefactors in peril. Nothing puts off potential supporters more than the possibility that their acts of benevolence may back fire and cause them untold pain and suffering...

Hopefully this article has resonated a little and maybe it has even helped to generate the impetuous you need to summon up the energy for an escape attempt of your own. All that remains is to wish you well, although as in classic film "The Great Escape" I will refrain from wishing you good luck for fear of putting the mockers on your own particular bid for freedom.

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