

A WOODCHOPPER'S TALE

By: Robert Sher

While delivering milk to town, a dairy farmer stopped his truck in front of his friend's farm to say hello. His friend, who had been chopping wood for weeks to prepare for winter, appeared unusually exhausted so the dairy farmer asked his friend to stop chopping and show him his axe.

The axe was as dull as a butter knife. "No wonder you are so tired. You need to sharpen your axe," he said.

"I don't have time," the friend replied, panting. "It is almost winter and I have to finish chopping this wood to keep my house warm. I just need to keep chopping."

This tale is a fabulous example illustrating inefficient work practices that can cripple the most talented managers and employees alike. How often have you heard someone say he or she is too busy to grab lunch? Have you ever called home to say you would be late to get ahead on a project?

Ask yourself this: How efficient is a boss going to be on an empty stomach? How good is that important project going to be if you stay at work staring at your computer screen, bleary eyed, tired and over-caffeinated? Is this how one gets ahead?

If you work with a dull axe, it will take longer to complete the job. Just like the woodchopper in the story I told above, you must sharpen your axe to chop faster, more efficiently and complete any task better.

In a state plagued by corporate downsizing, salary cuts, layoffs and a historic budget crisis, uncertainty over our futures seems to be the only thing you and your employees can count on, but planning for uncertainty is not healthy. Investing in yourselves, and in your employees, is a more appropriate response to the volatile environment.

To get through these challenging times, you must each find the right tools to be more efficient in your jobs, and in your lives. It is time to stop pushing ahead with dull blades and start learning how to work smart, and not just work hard.

Here's how you can start:

- Read a book on time management or take a class.
- Do not procrastinate. Procrastinating is like chopping wood with a dull axe. Emergencies will happen that will take you away from an important task so do not put off until tomorrow what you can do today.
- Stay up to date with technology. If you don't know how to use it to work smarter, get help.

- Consider replacing some out-of-town meetings with “virtual” meetings using technology.
- Get organized. Make a list of priorities and check them off as completed.
- Need help? Ask for it.
- Hire a coach or find a mentor.
- Take a Dale Carnegie class.

At some point, everyone complains about too much work. It is easy to get caught up in the fallacy of being too busy to stop and ask for help.

Sharpening the axe is the single most powerful investment you can ever make in life. This is a way to invest in yourself and might very well be the only instrument you will ever get that helps you deal with, and contribute to, life.

Robert Sher, CPA, is a Certified Executive Coach. Formerly CFO and partner for Schostak Brothers & Company, he now serves on the West Bloomfield Township Board of Trustees and is Treasurer of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants Foundation. His Email address is: info@bobsher.com.