

Map It Out

Diagnosing business problems beyond the symptoms

SOON AFTER MY SON STARTED KINDERGARTEN, his teacher scheduled a meeting to inform us that she thought he had ADHD, due to his constant squirming and inattention in the classroom. That diagnosis didn't feel right to us, so we mapped out how his days had changed since starting school. First, his normal eating patterns had changed. He was never one to want to eat in the morning. Second, he had a history of getting outside to play early in the morning. With the new school schedule, we were unable to fit in the morning run-and-play, and we were forcing orange juice and toast on him even though he wasn't interested.

We made a few adjustments. We got up earlier to get in some exercise before school, and we started feeding him only fats, proteins, and non-sugared drinks for breakfast. The very next week, the teacher called and said, "I can't believe it! I've never seen a child respond to treatment so quickly!"

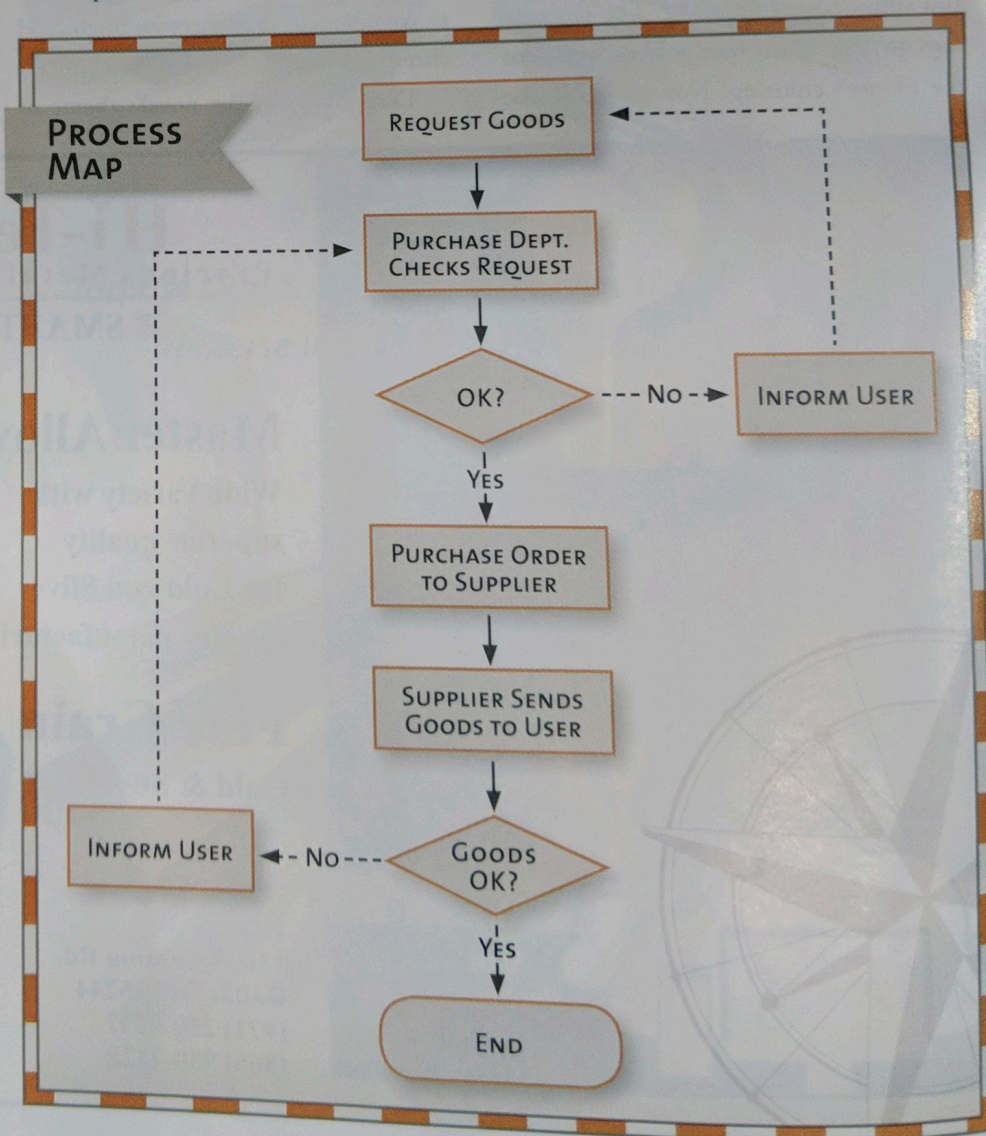
It's very common to solve problems one step away from the symptoms. In our son's case, that could have led to doctor appointments, prescriptions, and an unhappy little boy. In your business, that could lead to unnecessary expenses, a slowdown in your production, and a cascade of new-symptom management.

As I write this, I've been on-site at a large jewelry manufacturing and retail operation that wants to take its quality and

brand identity up to the next level. They had implemented a quality control process, and before they knew it, they were hiring more and more QC people, rejecting more and more inventory from both suppliers and their own manufacturing facility, and experiencing tension between the supply chain operations and the QC team.

They were solving their quality problems close to the symptom; in this case, a piece of jewelry that didn't meet their standards. This is referred to as "policing" quality, and it's an expensive way to go.

So we started tracking the quality problems back from the symptom, eventually leading to solutions in casting,



wax injection, and mold quality in manufacturing, and to plant inspections and quality cooperation on the supply chain side.

Discovering problems in your business is like hunting: Make sure you do your tracking and identify your target before you shoot. How do you do that?

I am a big fan of process maps. A process map is a super-easy-to-produce tool that allows you to visually identify every step in a process. Start from the problem, and work backwards. Write each step in a box, then add an arrow indicating the direction the process is moving in.

Once you create your process map, walk yourself through it from the first step to the last, pretending that you are a person who has never done the process before. When you do this, you will find that you skipped several steps and assumptions that are essential to doing the process correctly. Add in those elements, then walk through the process again.

When you are sure your process is mapped thoroughly and correctly, see if you can identify the point at which your problem is starting. Once you're sure you're at the root of the problem, that's the place to start solving.

You don't have to wait until you're having problems to do this work. Schedule one process map every month or every two weeks, then start working through them from the most important to the least important. This work should encompass every part of your business.

Once you complete each map, step back and consider all the points at which something could go wrong. Make a list of these potential failures. Then, go back to

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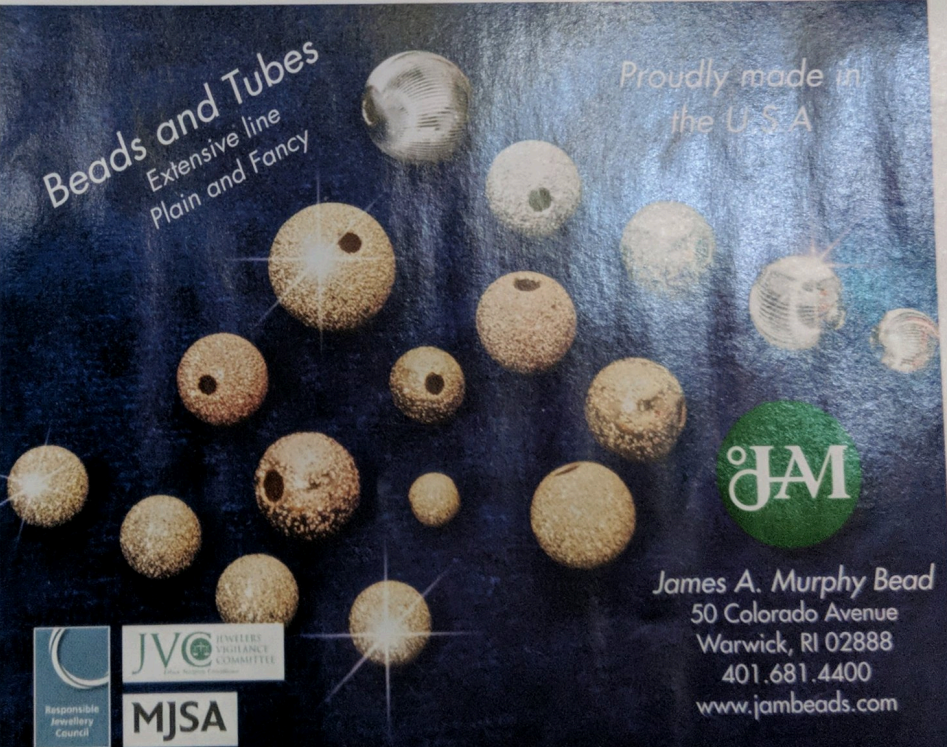
the list and rate every possible failure as to the potential impact of that failure, with "High" meaning terribly bad, "Low" being not great but let's avoid it, and "Medium" being somewhere in-between.

The next step is to develop an action plan. You do this by:

- Identifying detection methods.
- Developing responses to each failure.
- Defining who will do what, by when, when failure is detected.

Having this book of possible failures and solutions will help you avoid more problems and rapidly solve the ones that jump up and surprise you.

Solving and avoiding problems are two of the things you will spend much of your time on as a business owner. If you can avoid the problems in the first place—and solve the problems correctly the first time when they occur—you will save a lot of time and money. ♦



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