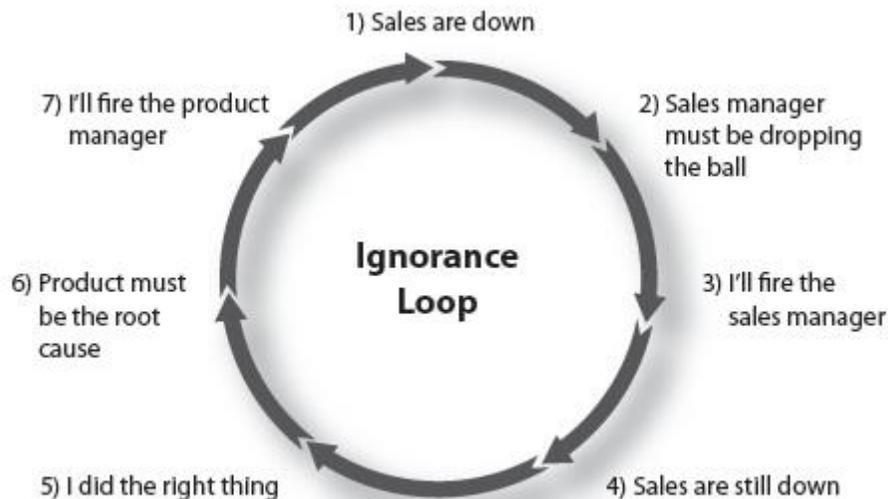# IGNORANCE LOOPS

I wrote in an earlier blog about the virtues of localized learning loops. In contrast, one of the most insidious forces at work in any organization are ignorance loops. They occur when people assume they know the answers and avoid looking further – even when the data suggests they are wrong. If their assumptions aren't challenged, the result is a feedback system that reinforces ignorance rather than intelligence.

Ignorance loops are born of the fact that once we make a decision, we select data and evidence that backs up our decision. When we buy a house or a car, for example, we select data to support the notion that we made a good deal. We are hard-wired to selectively sort information that reinforces our "rightness." Unless we are highly attuned to our assumptions, we'll ignore data that suggests we made a bad decision, unless or until the evidence becomes overwhelming.

The diagram above shows an ignorance loop in action. In this case, the president of a small software company is trying to deal with the fact that sales are down. He initially blames the sales manager, and so he fires her. When sales remain down, he defends his decision but then decides the product is no longer right for the market. Throughout this chain of decisions, the president assumes he's making sound decisions.

One of the biggest challenges a leader faces is weeding out ignorance loops.
When Reg Murphy was CEO of National Geographic, he would hold regular Friday morning meetings with his management team. The purpose was to challenge people's thinking. Reg instructed his senior executives to come ready to learn – no matter how challenging the learning might be. The operating rule was to "find out what we learned this week that we didn't know last week." People learned quickly that they had to bring hard data to these meetings – not their assumptions. They discussed marketing data, financial performance, and competitive trends. People were strongly discouraged from expressing any opinions about what the data meant until all the information had been shared.

Here are some clues that you've stumbled onto an ignorance loop:

• **Human Resources**: "People are leaving because we can't afford to pay them enough."
• **Finance**: "We need to be conservative; we simply can't afford this new program."
• **Marketing**: "This promotion is the answer to our sales challenges."
• **Sales**: "We are boxed in by our competitors. We can't change how we are positioned."
• **Production**: "In order to meet this deadline, errors are unavoidable."

Wherever you look, you'll find examples of ignorance loops that reinforce mediocre performance. Research has shown we trick ourselves into believing that we're doing a better job than we actually are. Our assumptions color our world. They filter through everything we say and do. We are our assumptions – at least at a cognitive level – and they are us.

How can you counter ignorance loops? The best way to confront them is with lots of good learning loops! If an R&D team is having a tough time developing new products, ask them to form a user group – and meet with it regularly. If the head of marketing says there's no way to change your market position, ask her to meet with your largest customers first – and then formulate a plan to increase market share. Challenge people's assumptions. Get them to think creatively. Force them to hear data and feedback that can help them shift their thinking.

When ignorance loops are tolerated, people quickly lose the ability to think clearly. "Group think" begins to take over. Strange assumptions begin to assert themselves. For example, the CEO of a bio-tech company liked to go on long bicycle rides every Saturday. He invited others to join him, and as a result, his top lieutenants spent thousands of dollars on cycling gear because they were all vying for his attention – and promotions. In fact, it became known inside the company that joining the "Spinners Club" was important for getting promoted. Imagine everyone's surprise, then, when the CEO picked someone outside the Spinners Club to be his successor. "I just felt we needed an injection of new blood," he told his surprised employees.

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