

Building Anticipation into a Firm's DNA

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teams are more effective
when everybody looks ahead



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This past summer, I was part of a team in a long-distance sailing race off the coast of Maine. As the trimmer, I was essentially responsible for keeping the wind in our sails from 11pm to 2am. That's a big responsibility, especially in the dark, fighting fatigue and with a few crewmates hanging over the side not feeling so chipper. But I wasn't alone—I was part of a team.

I was trimming the spinnaker, the big, often colorful sail you'll see forward of the bow of a boat when it's traveling with the wind. If you keep it at the right angle, it harnesses a lot of power, making the boat go faster. Operate it poorly, however, and your boat is slow or at risk of "wiping out." Because of the pressure that the wind puts on the sail, proper trimming is a two-person operation. The trimmer pulls on a rope to keep the sail in the right spot. At the same time, another crewmember, the grinder, operates a winch that allows the trimmer to pull. They need to work in concert with each other—one without the other is completely ineffective.

I was fortunate enough to work with a grinder who paid close enough attention to the sail that they anticipated when I would need to start pulling on the line. By recognizing common patterns together, and by anticipating each other's needs, the team performed at a high level—our combined efforts were more than just the sum of our individual efforts.

Anticipation is a critical ingredient to teamwork

Whether on a sailboat or in a business, anticipation makes teamwork more effective. It helps a team recognize patterns based on its collective experience so it can respond to situations before clients even recognize the need to take action.

The ability to anticipate doesn't just happen. And it's not something you can implement overnight. You need to build anticipation into your internal processes with intention. To make anticipation a core function, organizations need to focus on the following five key elements:

1. The right training

Team members need to know **why** they do what they do, not just **how** to do it. More specifically, they need to understand how their responsibilities fit into the bigger picture. That way they can see how their roles



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help drive the team closer to its collective goals. That context can help a team member to understand what needs to happen next, regardless of who should be responsible for completing that next step.

2. A clear process

The context necessary for anticipation requires a clear process and structure to how the team operates. When team members understand both the process and their place in it, they can build trust with those around them. They know when and how to step in without interrupting the larger flow. For example, as the trimmer, I know it won't do much good to start pulling on the sail before the grinder starts up the winch. This context is important if individuals are to identify opportunities for improving the process.

3. Deep knowledge

Creating an effective process and training people to use it helps ensure everybody in the organization sees the big picture. Combine an understanding of where people fit in the overall process with a deep knowledge of clients and customers, and you have an organization that's equipped not just to realize when things get off track, but also how to change course to fix it.

4. Great communication

No matter how well team members understand the big picture, they can't take collective action unless they cooperate with one another. Without open lines of communication, cooperation is practically impossible. It is critical to develop the communication skills necessary for fast and efficient handoffs between subsequent steps in a process. If that handoff takes too long, whatever action you were planning on taking is no longer anticipatory—worse yet, it could now be too late.

5. Individual empowerment

Ultimately, the ability to anticipate requires that you trust team members to improvise when necessary. When employees understand the big picture, they don't need to be told to do something. Team members need to be empowered to take action as needed to keep processes moving smoothly, even if that means taking on a task that doesn't usually fall within their responsibility.



Anticipation can be a difference maker

At Great Diamond Partners, our ability to anticipate client needs gives them peace of mind because they are faced with fewer surprises. We look around the corner while they focus on what's most important in their lives. Said differently, we're in the business of assuming delegated responsibility.

For instance, many business owners in their mid-50s are not thinking about selling their company. We know from experience that it's probably the best time to start considering how such a sale will unfold. Getting started early means ensuring the business fundamentals are in place to support a sale and that the owner is emotionally prepared to go through with the deal when the time comes. Given how long the process of a sale



can take, our ability to begin preparing before the owner is ready to pull the trigger can make the process much smoother when the owner decides the time is finally right. Further, the actions needed to prepare are fundamentally good for the business.

In this scenario and others, anticipation ultimately helps everybody. Clients are thrilled we're staying ahead of their needs. Empowering employees leads to better and more consistent improvements in internal processes. And effective teams generally lead to healthier, happier working environments. This all adds up to better results internally and externally.

For any process, from sailing downwind to navigating financial headwinds, having a team that understands the situation and is ready to respond before you need to tell them to act can pay dividends for your organization.

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