

Becoming the CEO of Your Problems

June 2014 Newsletter

A few years ago, the *NY Times* [interviewed](#) Mark Pincus, founder and recently-replaced chief executive of Zynga. Pincus told the interviewer that one of his key methods of leadership is to make everyone into a CEO in the company:

Mark Pincus: I'd turn people into CEOs. One thing I did at my second company was to put white sticky sheets on the wall, and I put everyone's name on one of the sheets, and I said, "By the end of the week, everybody needs to write what you're CEO of, and it needs to be something really meaningful." And that way, everyone knows who's CEO of what and they know whom to ask instead of me. And it was really effective. People liked it. And there was nowhere to hide.

NYTimes: So who were some of your new CEOs?

MP: We had this really motivated, smart receptionist. She was young. We kept outgrowing our phone systems, and she kept coming back and saying, "Mark, we've got to buy a whole new phone system." And I said: "I don't want to hear about it. Just buy it. Go figure it out." She spent a week or two meeting every vendor and figuring it out. She was so motivated by that. I think that was a big lesson for me because what I realized was that if you give people really big jobs to the point that they're scared, they have way more fun and they improve their game much faster. She ended up running our whole office.

It strikes me that one of the greatest benefits of [A3 problem solving](#) is that it enables people to take ownership of a problem, rather than having it fall into the no-man's-land between functional silos. You know how it goes: "That's marketing's responsibility." "No, it isn't. It's definitely part of the sales function." "Yes, but sales gets that information from IT." On and on it goes, with no hope of the issue ever getting resolved.

However, a robust A3 effort clearly defines the problem owner without disenfranchising or alienating the people that work in the functional silos. The left side of an A3—the "plan" part of PDCA—pushes people to fully grasp the situation. It fosters dialog among groups and forces clear visualization of the problem, which leads to compliance among all parties, if not outright agreement. The A3 author becomes the de facto CEO of the problem in question with the authority and the support to make the necessary changes and improvements.

Becoming the CEO of a problem stands in stark contrast with the news out of General Motors these days. The just-released internal investigation regarding the faulty ignition switch in the Cobalt and other cars describes a culture astonishing in its unwillingness to take ownership of problems. Per the [Wall Street Journal](#),

In the report, Ms. Barra was cited for a description of what she called the “GM Nod,” or meetings where participants appeared to nod in agreement that action should be taken, then did nothing. Another official invoked the “GM Salute,” or crossing arms and pointing toward other employees to indicate that “responsibility belongs to someone else, not me.”

Now, you can argue with Pincus’s approach. Telling an employee, “I don’t want to hear about it. Go figure it out.” doesn’t conform with all the tenets of “respect for people.” It also begs the question of how to train staff in thinking and solving problems. But at the very least, when Pincus tells someone to figure it out, it’s clear who has responsibility for the issue—and it’s certainly better than disavowing responsibility through the GM salute and nod.

Making a person the CEO of a problem is, I think, very much in keeping with the idea of granting ownership via A3. It ensures that something—and very likely the right thing—will get done.

NOTE: I’ve changed my corporate name from “TimeBack Management” to “Markovitz Consulting.” My new contact info is:

www.markovitzconsulting.com
dan@markovitzconsulting.com

My new website won’t be live for another few weeks, but please update your address books, email clients, white lists, Christmas lists, etc. in the meantime.

(Like this newsletter? Read my weekly blog post [here.](#))