



Kelly Allan Contributor

I help entrepreneurs and bring you their stories.

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

ENTREPRENEURS 8/16/2015 @ 8:00AM | 759 views

Yes, Small Businesses Can Learn From The Way This Government Agency Turned Itself Around

[Comment Now](#)

“I lost track of how many stress relief balls I squeezed to death while I struggled to turnaround my department,” says Bob Geis with a chuckle. “Those were tough times.”

Geis is the [Auditor-Controller of the County of Santa Barbara, California](#) whom I [introduced in my last post. I met and worked with Geis and his team in February](#), and over the months I have continued to learn about the story of the transformation of this government agency as it has moved to faster, better, cheaper, smarter ways of operating.

The transformation started with Geis’ election. “My bid to change how things operated in my office and in other county departments ruffled a lot of feathers. A number of people in county government made it clear they hated me for pointing out the issues –and they were not going to cooperate.”

Geis says that like any businessperson or entrepreneur with a big idea, he was a bit over-zealous in promising the taxpayers what he could deliver. [“But, as any entrepreneur will tell you: you have to start someplace –and you have to get started,” Geis observes.](#)

“I was determined to get started and to succeed. I had promised to bring better fiscal practices and reporting to county government so that taxpayers and county officials would have timely access to the information about the financial condition. Every organization needs that –otherwise you are operating blind.



Bob Geis: “When you inherit a swamp filled with alligators, you have to deal with the stress. Squeezing stress balls to death was where I started. But I learned that you have to find solutions that help you make rapid progress so you actually diminish the stress.” Photo by Lael Wageneck.

“The stress of starting on the journey to make that happen was tremendous, though. Today, we laugh about the stress relief balls I wore out, but we weren’t laughing then. Every day there was at least one new alligator –and we knew we had to find a way to drain the swamp. We were working as hard as we could work and just not making progress fast enough, hence the stress relief balls.

“And then I got lucky because I hired several really smart and experienced people. Among them was a guy by the name of Jim McClure, who had an MBA from Stanford and who also had spent much of his career as an officer in the Navy.”

Geis shakes his head as he tells the story, “I almost blew it, though. I initially rejected the solution that Jim proposed. He wanted me to learn how to drain the swamp, get rid of the gators, and to make things hum as they could and should. He didn’t want me to just cope with the stress, he wanted me to *get rid of it*.

“It is embarrassing to admit that I resisted the solution at first. I didn’t want to take time away from working IN the business to learn how to improve the business. Jim wanted me to see that I could saw more wood if I actually took time to sharpen the saw and to learn more about sawing. Among other things Jim knew human nature, and that sometimes people –people like me!– won’t do the smart thing until they’ve tried all the dumb things.”

Geis recalls the pivotal, heart-to-heart conversation that McClure had with him, “Jim was very polite and respectful when he spoke with me about what he thought I needed to do, not just because I was his boss, but because that is how he does things. But he was deeply serious, and I got the message,

which to my mind was basically, ‘Bob, if you want to manage me, if you want to clean up this mess, then you need to learn how to manage properly.’ He didn’t say, ‘or else I’m leaving’ but I think that is what he meant. And, I didn’t want to lose him.”

Geis says McClure strongly suggested that he attend a management seminar conducted by W. Edwards Deming, which McClure, himself, had done—and it had changed how he managed. “I looked at the price of the seminar and said to McClure, ‘This is expensive, and it’s four days away from work. I can’t ask the taxpayers to pay for this—even if I had time for it, which I don’t.’ McClure looked me in the eye, paused, and said very deliberately, ‘Bob, they’ll get their money back in no time, and save a whole lot more. This ...is ...the ...way ...to ...go.’ And that was that. I went.

“It was flat out one of the best decisions I ever made. It not only changed the course of my career, it helped me learn how to manage people, and to increase productivity and quality while reducing costs. And, that is exactly what had to be done to make sense of the fiscal picture and to get it in order.



W. Edwards Deming proposed a new philosophy of management. Bob Geis says he found Deming's approach to be, "Flat out the best way to manage."

“I was determined to run my government department like a business,” Geis continues. “Lots of lessons learned, I can tell you that. You would be surprised at some of things managers in business and government believe to be true, that well, just aren’t true. [Having the wrong beliefs just makes the struggle harder.](#)”

Here are a few key points Geis says he learned at the seminar to assist him in the struggle to turn things around:

- Never give up. [Agents for change never quit.](#)
- There is a completely different way to manage from what is normally taught about how to manage. The alternative is natural, proven, reliable, effective, and humane .
- The leader has to lead. You can lead through your title/power, through your charm and personality, or you can lead through what you know; and leading through knowledge is the most effective and lasts the longest.
- Without an AIM of what you want to accomplish, you won't. You and others will be, well, aimless.
- Always [focus on improving how we do things.](#)

More in upcoming posts.

The author donates the honorarium paid for this blog to The W. Edwards Deming Institute®, a non-profit helping businesses and organizations achieve success through Deming's philosophies. @KellyAllan6