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■ by Joan Adams

The “Broken Windows” Theory

Stopping the little things will deter bigger infractions.

In the early 1990s, Rudy Giuliani, then the newly elected Mayor of New York City, set out to prove that New York City – a city which for years had been assumed to be too big, too unruly, too diverse, too broke to be managed – was in fact, manageable. He had read a seminal article by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling (written in 1982), called “Broken Windows.” Duly impressed with the concepts elucidated in the article, Rudy was the first big city mayor to put the theory into action.

The “Broken Windows” thesis posits that something as simple as a building with a broken window signals abandonment, a lax attitude toward property, and therefore an absence of respect for the law. The “broken window” is the first step in a neighborhood’s slow decline and deterioration. In the neighborhood, over time, other evidence of decay would show up – for example: more broken windows, trash accumulation, graffiti and abandoned cars. The change is slow and for a time, imperceptible to the people who live in the neighborhood. The theory states that left unrepaired, the broken window slowly but surely turns into many broken windows. Pretty soon, this obviously abandoned building attracts people who have taken to hanging out there. Panhandling, prostitution, drug dealing – all become part of the regular activities in front of the building which then spreads out into the neighborhood. People who live in the area start to feel vulnerable and begin to withdraw. They become less willing to intervene to maintain public order (for example, they are afraid to break up the groups of toughs loitering on the stoop) or address physical signs of deterioration.

Sensing the withdrawal, the dealers, panhandlers, prostitutes and petty criminals become bolder and intensify their harassment and vandalism. Residents become yet more fearful and withdraw further from community involvement and upkeep. This atmosphere now attracts new offenders from outside the area, who sense that the neighborhood is a less risky site for crime. The cycle that started with one broken window has

spiraled down, resulting in a broken neighborhood.

Following the lessons from “Broken Windows,” Willie Bratton, the chief of police at the time, aggressively went after the graffiti artists, subway turnstile jumpers, panhandlers, loiterers, etc. The homeless were required to stay in shelters, graffiti was removed within 24 hours and yes, broken windows were identified and repaired. In the beginning, he took a lot of flak for going after the so-called “petty” criminals. The general sentiment was, “Who cares about panhandlers, hookers, graffitiists? They don’t hurt anyone.” Wrong! The reality was and is – they do hurt people. They can take down entire neighborhoods.

People will break windows every day – if you let them

Most of us are capable of being “good” when nudged in that direction and by the same token, most of us are capable of being “bad” when no one seems to care. Much like the criminals of New York City, we take our cues from the society around us. If everyone is driving 10 to 15 miles over the speed limit, we have no problem speeding. People don’t litter in a museum. Somehow they “know” this is not acceptable (the cue being there is no litter on the floor). But those very same people will litter without a second thought at the ballpark (there’s already trash everywhere, so what’s another piece matter?). In many cases, these aren’t conscious decisions. We are simply reacting to our surrounding environment.

Letting the small infractions slip by with no consequences creates an atmosphere that encourages people into believing that those small infractions aren’t a big deal. Pretty soon, bigger infractions are committed and these too are not considered to be a big deal. “Broken Windows” suggests that stopping the little things will prevent the escalation, the acceptance of bigger and bigger infractions.

(In 1994, at the beginning of the Giuliani administration, 2,801 murders were committed. In 2003, nine years later, 537 murders were committed in NYC, the lowest murder rate since 1963.)

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“Broken Windows” can happen to your company

The “Broken Windows” syndrome happens in companies, too. Minor infractions, such as coming in late, dressing sloppily, and letting the work area become a mess, signal a lack of respect for the work place.

I have seen many warehouses that are just dumps. When I make any reference to the nasty conditions, often all I get is a shrug and “Yeah, I know, but you know guys – that’s just how they are.” That’s how they are because you have let them get away with it. Your tolerance says, “Do whatever you want, I don’t care, I am not going to stop you and there will be no consequences.” Yet, these same managers are furious when workers trash equipment or damage material. And they are downright shocked when they find out that illegal activities are being conducted right there – in the warehouse.

The same goes for company vehicles. These are expensive assets that are frequently driven into the ground – and no one seems to care. Drivers aren’t expected to perform simple maintenance.

Other bad behaviors such as showing up late, leaving early or racking up unnecessary overtime occur and there is no comment. Can anyone possibly be surprised that things are bad and getting worse? Over time, discipline and general good behavior are deteriorating. Those who used to care have withdrawn. Those who don’t care are encouraged to care even less by the absence of consequences.

Companies are small, self-contained entities compared to New York City. You can take back control – and understanding the subtle messages that tolerating bad behavior is sending to your employees plays an important role in changing company culture.

Set the rules - keep the rules

In the beginning, your people will be surprised. They will want to know why things that used to be acceptable are

suddenly punishable offences. Many will find the new zero tolerance policy arbitrary, over the top and extremely unfair. (Others, those who used to care, will quietly applaud these changes.) Don’t be dissuaded. If some folks are unhappy, you are probably on the right track.

You should begin by setting down the rules for behavior in your company. Dress codes, responsibilities, warehouse cleanliness and vehicle maintenance should all be written down and distributed. The rules must be proactively broadcast to the entire company. No rule should be a surprise to anyone. And then adhere to the rules scrupulously, by which I mean, make the rules apply to everybody, every day. You can’t tell the warehouse guys they must punch in at least five minutes before shift and then let your favorite sales guy roll in 30 to 45 minutes late on a regular basis. Similarly, you can’t blow off the rules some days, because “we got busy.” The rules are non-negotiable. They are part of everyone’s job and responsibility – favorite sales guy or not – insanely busy day or not.

Learn from the lessons of “Broken Windows.” Start sweating the small stuff now and I promise you that in the future, you will have a whole lot less big stuff to worry about. <<

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