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Are You Focused on the Right Things?

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Jim Boomer • Jul. 11, 2017



focus

We're midway through 2017. How are you coming along with the goals you set at the beginning of the year? Do you still have a positive outlook for what lies ahead? Almost before we know it, fall deadlines will be here, then year end, then many of you will be diving head first into another busy tax season. Before you get too buried, I challenge you to take a moment to take stock of what you've accomplished so far this year and make plans to finish 2017 on a high note. I'd also like to share a simple exercise called Start-Stop-Continue to get you focused on what you should be doing and, just as important, not doing to support you and your team's goals for the rest of the year and beyond.

You can do this on your own or in a group, but it's most powerful when you include key members of your team. Each person answers the following questions for themselves and each other:

- **Start** – What is the one thing that you or the other person should **START** doing? This will highlight where talents are not being utilized to the full potential.
- **Stop** – What is the one thing that you or the other person should **STOP** doing? This will highlight where activities are getting in the way of success.

- **Continue** – What is the one thing that you or the other person should CONTINUE doing? This will highlight where talents are being utilized and can be expanded.

To do this as a group, you might hang three posters on the wall or allocate three sections of a whiteboard: one for Start, one for Stop, and one for Continue. Then gather the team together and hand out sticky notes to all of the participants, asking them to jot down ideas for Start, Stop, and Continue.

After 10 to 15 minutes of ideation time, team members place their sticky notes under either Start, Stop, or Continue. Many of the sticky notes will contain related ideas. Group the sticky notes into logical themes and take some time to discuss one or more of the most common ideas. To keep the conversation moving, you can allocate five to 10 minutes to addressing each topic.

The best place to begin, of course, is Start. What ideas have people been kicking around that they haven't had the time to execute? Are conditions right to move ahead with a new process or initiative?

Next, move on to Stop. What activity consumes a lot of time for very little return or reward? Do any processes cause an inordinate amount of stress? These conversations help you spot activities that distract you from your core purpose. Eliminating them will feel like a breath of fresh air.

Finally, turn toward Continue. This is the time to identify and evaluate activities that show positive results and contribute to the success of your firm. Encourage team members to share stories about wowing a client or turning around a difficult situation.

At the end of an hour, you'll have a stack of ideas. Some you can move forward with right away, others you may need to keep for another time. But look for a few quick wins that you can accomplish right away. This will give participants evidence that their opinions matter and that the process is valuable.

While it's simple, it isn't easy. Everyone must be willing to put themselves in a vulnerable position and be committed to change. We've done this with many of our clients as well as within our own leadership team. It facilitates open, honest conversation and gets everyone focused on what is most essential for future success.

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