



EMERGE FROM THE DARK SIDE

How Just Paying the Rent Can Draw You Over

By Dr. Fred Johnson

Those who have participated in an Initiative One Leadership Process are familiar with the term “pay the rent” (PTR). PTR describes the daily, ongoing firefighting, immediate problem solving activity that is part of every leader’s day. PTR consists of those mundane but necessary things that are the essence of performing the business. Pay the rent is important because if we are not successful in this endeavor, there is a strong likelihood we won’t last long enough to achieve our Vision by reaching our critical goals.

Excelling in PTR is essential to achieve a high level of customer service and the resulting high satisfaction. Show me a company that ignores PTR and I’ll show you a company with a poor level of customer satisfaction.

The problem with “pay the rent” is that it can become all consuming, and in fact does, for many companies and their leaders. PTR is reactive, not pro-active. I remember one executive who obviously liked being stuck in “pay the rent” mode. He told me, “I don’t have time to focus on vision, values, and critical goals. In fact, I don’t need to. Everyday I just show up and problems always find me. Staying busy is not a problem.”

This executive demonstrated the unhealthy, dark side of pay the rent. This man had succumbed to and embraced the dark side. When one is immersed in pay the rent, and not balanced by a strategic focus on higher, long-term goals, the price is the abdication of leadership. When leaders are driving the vision, communicating and measuring critical goals, they are setting the agenda for others to follow. However when they can’t get out of PTR, everyone else sets the agenda for them. They may be busy, but in the long-run they will not be effective. Remember, leaders measure their effectiveness, not by merely being busy, but by the impact of their efforts.

How do so many of us fall into the grip of excessive PTR so easily?

There are five telltale pitfalls that lead to the dark side:

1. **People Pleasing** – The desire to have another person like us or respect us is universal for all of us. Unfortunately it can damage our effectiveness. This trap occurs when we frequently acquiesce to another person’s expectations which

have nothing to do with advancing our own purposes and responsibilities in the organization.

2. **Poor Boundaries** – Typically, to avoid conflict with others, we avoid difficult conversations in which we must communicate that we do not have the time, the resources, or even organizational sanction to invest in their priorities.
3. **Less Than Impeccable Communication** – We often fall into the unhealthy side of PTR when we avoid negotiating with a person whose demands, timelines, or expectations are not reasonable. Because we will not lead ourselves, we abdicate our leadership to others who may be more direct, clearer, or more aggressive.
4. **The Lure of Instant Gratification** – Usually PTR involves a short-term payoff. One can solve a problem quickly and receive quick gratification. Unfortunately, high level goals and objectives almost always take much longer and require sustained discipline. While vision whispers, PTR screams. Because we become so preoccupied with the urgent, we lose our attention to the important.
5. **The Unwillingness to Ask For Help** – Just this week a leader explained to me that she found it difficult to focus on strategic level responsibilities. She stated she was afraid to ask her partners to cover her while she was in executive strategic planning sessions. She found herself trying to be in two places at once, letting down her client, her team who waited for her to show and herself for not fulfilling her commitment.

Ultimately, we fall into unproductive “pay the rent” when we try to be all things to all people. In doing so, we eventually become nothing to everyone, including ourselves.

In conclusion, allow me to challenge you to a call to action that might be eye-opening. Chart a typical week’s activity in 30 minute intervals; from the time you arrive at work to when you end your workday. At the end of the week, add up how many hours you spent in “pay the rent” firefighting instead of activity that focused on advancing your highest goals and objectives. Most people are surprised at the outcome. You may find you have unknowingly drifted to the dark side.