

Using Potential Opportunity Analysis in Everyday Work Life

Purpose

To apply Potential Opportunity Analysis (POA) in everyday work situations.

POA around Travel

You just found out you have to be in a distant part of the country for a sales call next week. It's a long trip, far out of your way, and you're not looking forward to going all the way out there and back for one day. But if you ask 'What else might I do while I'm in...?', you might think of that other client who you want to talk to in person who is only an hour away. If you took the promoting action of calling the second client in advance, getting a ticket that can be changed if needed, and maybe reserving an extra night at the hotel, it might increase the likelihood of the second meeting, at a very low cost.

POA around Time

You are at the airport heading back from your successful two-client trip when your flight is delayed. 'Oh, great,' you think, 'another wasted two hours.' But if you consider what you might profitably do with the time, you might realize that your clients in ..., an hour earlier, are still in the office; you might decide that now would be an excellent time to type up your notes summarizing today's client meetings, while they are still fresh in your mind; you might consider if this would be a good time to get your expense report out of the way. Promoting actions might include finding a power outlet you can plug your laptop into, and finding a quiet corner of the terminal with a good cell phone signal.

POA around Resources

You thought you had reserved George to be the lead on a major project, but he is not going to be available. But you discover that Mary might be free. Focus only on the knowledge and experience required to get the task done. What could Mary bring to this that George would not? How might you take advantage of Mary's unique skill set?

POA in Product Development

The process of New Product Development (or New Service Development, for that matter) has many opportunities to use POA. Try this from both the customer's point of view, and from your own corporate point of view as well. "What if our new fever thermometer could actually 'speak' the temperature instead of just beeping to tell you to read it? How might this increase sales to the visually impaired? . . . What if instead of beeping or enunciating the temperature, the screen flashed at you when the temperature reading was stable. How might this increase sales to the hearing impaired? . . . What if the thermometer included a switch, to enable you to either hear the temperature or see it, so both of these populations could be addressed by one product?"

Try this in both directions—positive and negative; adding features or removing them.

(For some customers, and with some products, ‘less is more’.) What if the fever thermometer didn’t have any numbers for patients to interpret at all? What if it just said, ‘Do Nothing, Take an Aspirin, or Call a Doctor’—the actions you should take at different temperature ranges?. . . What if our new laptop skipped having a CD/DVD drive, and just had folks load content via the Web?. . . What if we skipped a keyboard altogether and just relied for input on voice recognition?

POA around People

Most work today gets done through people. No project, no major initiative takes place until and unless it is approved by the right people. But what if we got their buy-in early, so they could use their influence to secure resources and facilities and equipment? What objectives do they have for the project that we could appeal to? What if this project got prioritized ahead of others in the portfolio? And how might we get those who make the decision on our side?

Turning a PPA into a POA

This may be the most artful technique of all—to be confronted with a potentially serious problem and turning some of it, or even all of it, into an opportunity. Say that our thermometer manufacturer, above, is getting ready to launch a new digital thermometer, and has built their advertising campaign around the benefit that the digital unit is ‘mercury-free’ and ‘good for the environment’. But say that a new study is published showing that the batteries that power the digital unit contain mercury, and that folks are much more likely to toss a battery into the garbage than they are to throw away a mercury thermometer. As a result, the public now believes, correctly it turns out, that battery-operated thermometers are much more troubling for the environment than old-style mercury ones. What will you do now? How might you make this problem go away? Even better, how might you turn it into an opportunity?

What if, with each digital thermometer you sell, you also sell two batteries. The customer inserts the first one into the unit, and when the power fades, she removes it, inserts the second battery in the device, and then drops the expired battery into the pre-paid mailer you included in the package. The thermometer keeps working with the second battery with no interruption in service, and a week later you receive a new battery in the mail. We have now become not just your thermometer vendor, but your long-term battery supplier. And while we’re at it, we might throw in some marketing materials with each refill, telling you about our new blood pressure monitor, or our new glucose tester, or other devices.

A fire has caused this year’s New Product Show to be postponed for a month. What if we used that month to add that recording feature we talked about but didn’t have the time to program?

The Vice President of Quality just broke her leg and will be out for weeks. Might this be an opportunity to have one of the people we are grooming for that position take over, on a temporary basis?

You have to shut down your Nuclear Power Plant every eighteen months to replenish the fuel rods. Most of your people will sit idle for a month while this happens. But what you might be able to do in the Plant—equipment maintenance, changing the physical layout, swapping out two pumps—that you could not do when the Plant is up and running?

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. However, it does highlight some unique POA areas for the project manager to consider.

Instructions

1. Briefly describe a recent situation where action had to be taken and you were not satisfied with the results. That is, you settled for an obvious solution without considering other opportunities, without exploring alternate paths.

2. What quick Potential Opportunity Analysis questions might have improved those results?

3. Describe one kind of situation where you must repeatedly take quick action on your job and find it easy to give 'automatic answers'.

4. What two or three Potential Opportunity Analysis questions will improve your success in this kind of situation? Feel free to tailor them to the content of the situations you typically encounter.

5. How can you make sure you use these questions in handling this type of situation?
