

FILL A GAP STORIES

Every business has important tasks that are falling through the cracks because they're not part of anyone's job description. Look closely and you'll notice the gaps: inefficient processes, underperforming projects, unmet customer needs, and leaderless teams. The seasoned leaders I've interviewed aren't comfortable with the status quo. They are relentless gap spotters. Want examples? Here are three:

See a Gap, Fill a Gap

Five years into her career, Ancestry vice president Leila Pourhashemi was working as a Customer Technical Escalations Lead for the printer division at Sun Microsystems, a role that required her to take items escalated by top customers and drive them to resolution. When she realized the average time taken to resolve an issue was 60 days, she became convinced that fixing this should be their highest priority. Pourhashemi made her case, and got others to agree. She built relationships with engineering and product leaders and created a dashboard so the whole team could hold itself accountable to better resolution times. Within a couple months, the average resolution time had dropped from two months to two days.

Keep your antennae up. Pay attention to what people complain about, the inefficiencies that are getting overlooked, the seemingly important tasks that don't fall under anyone's job description, or when people say "we've always done it this way." As Pourhashemi says, "See a gap, fill a gap."

The Beauty of Streamlining

Executive editor Elizabeth Dougherty is known for her uncanny ability to streamline processes and recognize when someone is redoing repetitive tasks from scratch that an outside expert can do faster, cheaper, and more accurately. "Organized" appears on every performance review I've ever had," says Dougherty, who's now a freelance editor. "I know it's not a sexy word, but my analytical and organizational skills enable me to fill gaps that other people didn't even know existed."

While working at a San Francisco book publisher, Dougherty's team inherited a line of books when another editor left and wasn't replaced. Dougherty overhauled how these books were being produced. She standardized internal processes and outsourced much of the workload to freelance experts. The result? Greatly reduced costs and error-free work. Plus, her team absorbed the entire workload without working longer hours. Better yet, with clearly defined processes, she was able to turn over day-to-day management to her assistant editor as a well-deserved stretch assignment.

"The beauty of streamlining is that it frees you from office housework so you can focus on doing good work and being creative," says Dougherty.

Keep your antennae up for inefficiencies that are getting overlooked or when people say, "We've always done it this way." As Dougherty says, "Always look for ways to make things better, and prevent wasted time and needless fire drills."

A Collective Stretch

If you're interested in developing new leadership skills, here's an even bigger challenge: dare a team or even an entire organization to step up to new ways of working and thinking. This is what Tara Jaye Frank refers to as "a collective stretch."

When Frank worked in writing and editorial with Hallmark, she was invited to be part of a cross-functional innovation team that brought together people from other departments like supply chain, marketing, and finance, to focus on innovation and new ways of growing the business.

She let it be known that this was exactly the kind of work she wanted to do more of, and helped embed that kind of thinking into the organization's structure. The stretch assignment turned into her next job. "Look for what you involve yourself in that can help take your company, group, or team in a new direction" says Frank.