

One Foot on the Boat, One Foot on the Dock

By James A. Alexander, Ed.D.

Every boater knows the feeling, the queasiness in the stomach that comes the instant you feel you are no longer in control--stretched (literally) between where you have been (the dock) and where you'd like to go (the boat). Docking line in one hand and boat hook in the other, while your feet continue to move in opposite directions, you immediately grasp the meaning of "between the devil and the deep blue sea."

In this situation, your **immediate** actions will determine whether you cast-off on your new intended voyage, tie-off back to the firm ground from which you came, or splash-off "down to Davey Jones" (as old sailors would say). Not a pleasant situation.

As a leader of a services organization, you may find yourself with one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat much more often than you'd like. As you work to steer your PSO ahead to accomplish your goals, you may feel a constant current tugging you back to support the different objectives of the product-side of the house. One foot stretched to deliver profitable services projects, the other foot extended (non-billable, of course) supporting product sales or putting out customer fires.

So what do you do to stay on the course of high performance? Our latest study of 157 professional services organizations within product companies provides some guidance to smooth sailing. The high performing PSOs had this in common:

- 1. They did a better job of communicating the PSO value proposition both *outside* in the marketplace and *inside* the organization.** Hence, you need to constantly be communicating what your PSO does and the benefit it produces for all stakeholders. This is a big part of your job.
- 2. They had a clearer understanding of how their PSO differentiated itself from competitors.** Therefore, get the market intelligence you need to focus your PSO on areas it can distinguish itself with clients (deliver more value and make more money).
- 3. They were much better at aligning their professional services strategy with the overall business strategy** (this is a best practice). So take the time to meet with senior management on a regular basis to force the question, "How can the PSO best help the business accomplish its mission and achieve its goals?" Sure, there will be times when it is necessary to steer a little off your desired heading, but you can plan for this ahead of time and put contingencies in place.

The natural elements (winds of business change, rising tides of the marketplace, and undertows of competition) are always a danger to pulling your PSO off course. Keep both feet on your boat--plan ahead, anticipate trouble, and steer toward your destination with conviction.

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