

TheMittani.com, Inc retained the Crowbar Factory in January 2017 for organizational development consulting, and in less than six months Toni's advice and counsel has completely transformed the operations and direction of our company. We are now more profitable and effective than at any time in our history, and as CEO I personally have become a more successful manager while simultaneously being far less stressed than before, despite running a startup.

Organizational development consulting is different for each client, and so instead of writing a "rah rah" rec of Toni, I'm going to provide some background about my organization and myself, and what specific changes we've made based on Toni's consultation and what the impacts of those have been.

The most dangerous risks in business and in life are always "unknown unknowns", the blind spots - the stuff you don't know that you don't know, and thus can't begin to investigate or educate yourself about. By late 2016 I could sense that there were voids in my knowledge, and while our company was in the black, we were not reaching our potential. Worse, I found myself attempting to crib best practices from business literature, but a best practice only works in the context of a given organization: you can read Andrew Grove's "High Output Management" all day, but unless you're running a company similar to Intel, focusing on one-on-ones and annual reviews of employees isn't going to transform a startup. I retained Toni to give our organization an outside perspective, to fill in our blind spots, identify the unknown unknowns, and thus allow us to figure out what to fix and plan accordingly.

For context, I run two large organizations: a video game media startup, TheMittani.com Inc (now DBA Imperium News), and the Imperium, the largest single organization of video game players under one banner in the history of the industry, approximately 60,000 unique players across a number of platforms and titles. We have been profiled in the Wall Street Journal and Playboy.com. While Toni was retained for TheMittani.com, Inc, many of her organizational tools were applied to great effect within the Imperium as well, meaning that the impact of her consulting work for TheMittani.com has impacted tens of thousands of people.

The first part of the process was an examination of the CEO's schedule, meeting structure, personal organizational tools and approach to business. This intake revealed something I was completely unaware of: meeting creep. I had been implementing so many one-on-ones and org meetings that 17 hours a week was being spent in some form of a CEO -> staff meeting. Immediately Toni helped me consolidate these into a set of group meetings, and provided a customized template for our organization to make the agendas and minutes far more effective. Suddenly I found myself having free time in my schedule, the meetings we did have ended in 30 minutes instead of an hour, and I could breathe again. It seems simple in hindsight, but it's stunning how over a period of years institutional 'cruft' stacks up on a CEO; like boiling a frog slowly, except instead of hot water there's 'just one more meeting' each month.

Toni also assisted in showing me a number of ways to adjust my personal schedule to match my business, which in the video game world spans several timezones and thus a traditional 'early bird' CEO schedule wasn't working - many of the events we needed to cover on the media site were taking place late at night, yet I was trying to adhere to the laughable 'hero CEO' schedule copy and pasted on so many crap business sites.

With schedules, meeting format and meeting structures rendered more efficient, suddenly TheMittani.com Inc had more time to plan and work together on projects. Meanwhile, a similar 'meeting purge' took place in the Imperium, rendering our community far more effective in terms of freed up brainpower across a number of orgs. This was January 2017.

The next suggestion Toni provided was to implement a 'sprint' system, similar to that in Agile development, but customised for a media company instead of a software developer. This allowed the various teams of TheMittani.com Inc to work on cross-functional projects for the first time, which provided a new energy to the staff - instead of doing the same thing each week, suddenly there was variety, challenge and flow. This suggestion was not an off-the-shelf fix, either; like with the 'fix the CEO and meetings' process in January, February began with a drill-down on the long history of our company and its precursors, as well as our wider community. Toni often makes a distinction between covert and overt needs in a client, these being the blind spots; I was complaining about stagnation and a cycle of staff running out of enthusiasm, and she went to first principles. I had no desire or interest in a sprint system, but she demonstrated that what I thought was wrong - stagnation - was a symptom of a lack of variety and challenge in the divisions of the company, which would be solved by cross-functional team projects under a sprint system. It worked, and our site has grown massively since implementing this.

The past several months, Toni has moved towards fixing our external communications and messaging by pointing out how our customer-focused presentations were, politely, crap (she didn't say this, but I get to, in hindsight) and lasering in on exactly how we should communicate who we are and what we do, not only to customers but to our staff. I started with "I don't really like our powerpoint" and Toni not only showed us how to make far superior ones, but she helped us create a focused sense of company identity (we strive to be a site which defends and informs our community with content that makes our readers feel alive). Again, the issue (bad powerpoints, mixed messages) were symptoms of a deeper problem that existed within an organizational blind spot. I wanted to fix the symptom, Toni identified the underlying cause, showed us how to fix it, and fixed the symptom too.

Recently she has been cutting through some of the older issues which have been plaguing the company for so long that I and our staff had essentially forgotten they were a problem, like an old aching injury one simply tunes out after a while. I realize that I've now written a surplus of words, so I won't go into excruciating detail about these; you get the idea. Every organization is different and every situation needs a different solution, but the above should demonstrate Toni's adaptability and utility.

There is one particular skill Toni brings to the table which is separate from the formal process of organizational development: an almost preternatural ability to get inside the heads of the competition and predict their moves, which is something that I myself am supposedly quite good at, according to the media. This was not what I retained her for, but over the course of working for TheMittani.com Inc she has demonstrated an uncanny knack for making accurate predictions about the behavior of individuals - her analysis is almost Sherlockian.

An example, with the names removed to protect the guilty: At one point we were engaging with a possible business deal which I had some misgivings about. A meeting was scheduled between third parties, and I did not know the exact time or location of the meeting. Toni predicted days in advance that I should expect a number of frantic phone calls from the meeting,

‘unexpectedly’, and that the intention of this would be to put me on the spot and attempt to leverage an agreement which would be harmful to our organization. Sure enough, the phone calls came, and I was strategically unavailable - and later confirmed that indeed Toni was right, in every detail.

The only hesitation I have about writing this recommendation is that her time is limited, and the larger the Crowbar Factory’s clientele grows, the less time she may have available to work her magic with TheMittani.com. However, she’s been so effective in her consulting that this almost doesn’t matter anymore - she’s systematically investigated and fixed division after division in our organizations, and she’s done so well that inside of a month of this writing (June 2017) there’s simply not going to be anything left to consult over.