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Disrupting the Culture

By Paperitalo Staff

This is a problem I see all the time. I was reminded of it this week when I read about another mill closing in the US Northwest.

It goes something like this. A mill is in terrible trouble, meaning, the invoice printer is not spinning faster than the check writer, of course (what other kind of trouble could you be in?—everything distills to this in business). Management, wringing their hands, calls me or someone like me in and says, “What do we do?”

One spends about a week wandering around the place, observing how things are done, going to the morning meetings, maintenance meetings and so forth. With a broad experience in a number of mills, it is usually pretty easy to come up with a laundry list of issues that one has seen executed better elsewhere. Now, this does not violate any confidentiality agreements, we are talking on a high level here.

One confronts management with the issues. The answer is always the same, or nearly the same: “We have spent many years cultivating the culture here; we know what our people will tolerate and what they won’t. Your ideas are too radical, too much danger of disruption.”

Really? How much disruption do you think there is going to be when everyone is standing out in the parking lot and a padlock is on the door? How much disruption will there be when unemployment runs out? Why did you bring in a management consultant in the first place?

Very often, the answers are common sense and staring management in the face. Run a legal, ethical and moral business. Keep the place cleaned up. Prepare budgets in such a way that any eventuality is anticipated. Hold people accountable for real progress.

The reality is, there are no miracles. People like me, who have been in literally hundreds of mills, have observed and developed techniques, but we are not miracle workers. When Vince Lombardi became coach of the Green Bay Packers, he inherited a confused and dispirited team. After watching them in a few practices, he called a halt. He took the football and (I am paraphrasing) said, “This is a football. Our objective is to take it to that end zone down there and keep our opponents from bringing it to this end zone down here.” In other words, he went back to the basics.

Today, there are management programs and techniques galore. They range from books to complicated computer software. But the fact remains—you must execute the fundamentals very, very well. No management program of any kind can make up for this. No management program or technique can eschew individual responsibility. Group responsibility is a fool's paradise.

If you are having problems, decide what the fundamentals are in your business and execute them better than anyone else on the planet. Stop looking for management gimmicks—there are none.

Safety is all about fundamentals. Establish practices to eliminate the possibility of accidents. When an accident happens, render proper aid as quickly and safely as possible. ##