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Getting things done

By Paperitalo Staff

A friend of mine recently shared a bit of correspondence he had had with a certain paper mill over a period of two or three years. The conversation originally started with the mill seeking help from this friend concerning a particular quality problem they were experiencing. At the time, they seemed to be having a crisis—answers were needed quickly. Some recommendations were made and time went by. After a couple of years, my friend reconnected with the mill as a follow-up. The answer back was that the problem still existed and they were going to be addressing it very soon.

There are several lessons here, even with this limited amount of data. First, I suspect the original problem was generated by a complaint from a customer. Hence the crisis quality of the original inquiry—a loss of money or a loss of a customer was involved. Second, the crisis passed because the customer let it pass, the customer was lost or a bigger crisis arose in another area of the business.

Without knowing any more, however, I can reasonably surmise that the mill initiating this inquiry has many other problems and issues in similar conditions. For what I suppose from this whole vignette is a pattern of poor management, a lurching from issue to issue without any stability, any resolution to the myriad conditions that pop up daily.

These conditions can happen on several levels. On one level they can happen personally—an individual with poor personal management skills can live this way day to day. This is bad enough, for such an individual is ineffective. On another level, a manager can behave this way and infuse a culture of lurching from fire to fire amongst their entire cohort of underlings. This is even worse.

In my role, I often have the opportunity to observe organizations for brief periods of time, and sometimes these observations are repeated over a long period. I have noticed that organizations (or individuals) in a lurching from crisis to crisis mode stay that way. Occasionally, when I am first introduced into such cultures, the condition is voluntarily acknowledged with the assurance that

it is “just temporary”—as soon as a certain event or set of events pass, it will be over. I have not found this to be true. A lurching culture is a lurching culture and is almost always event independent. Those who believe otherwise or tell outside observers such as me that such conditions are temporary are just trying to deceive themselves.

The reasons for lurching from crisis to crisis are purely internal and I think I can prove it. Let us take a couple of professions that seem to have the best opportunity for being in such a condition: firefighting or perhaps police officer duty. People in these professions are definitely dealing with conditions out of control, in fact, I can think of none more out of control than a raging conflagration, be it a home, industrial or forest fire. Yet the professionals that tackle these do so with good records of success. How do they accomplish this? A clear command and control culture coupled with excellent repetitive training and esprit de corps. It also helps to have the correct equipment and consumable resources in abundant supply.

What job does you or your department do that is harder than firefighting? If you are not succeeding, which of the vital components of a fire department are you lacking? Can you correct the situation? If you are lurching from crisis to crisis, perhaps today is the day you can recognize the real cause, take steps to correct it and start to enjoy better working conditions. When you accept the crisis mode as not event driven, but internally driven, you will find a career holding great satisfaction.

We often do take safety seriously enough to recognize that it is personal attitude driven, not event driven. Perhaps it is time we took our safety training, reversed it, and applied its principles to the rest of our jobs. Be safe and we will talk next week. ##