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Turn yourself around

By Paperitalo Staff

There is a technique that works wonders in managing others. It works in managing your boss, subordinates, suppliers and customers and even, yes, in your personal life.

Sometimes it is called walking in the other person's shoes. I like to think of it as sitting on the other person's side of the table, or "turning yourself around." Whatever you call it, the idea is to view a given situation or relationship from the point of view of the person with whom you are dealing. Let's go through some of these one at a time.

Take your boss, for instance. As it was described to me by a new boss one time, my job was "to make my boss look good." I'll add a little more to that—it also means avoiding any actions that will embarrass my boss. Notice that my boss did not say it was my job to "spin the invoice printer" (perhaps he was not so enlightened), but what he did say was very important in my relationship with him. There is the old line, "what's interesting to my boss is fascinating to me" which is not too far off the mark.

What do subordinates want? Independence, money, time off, and recognition. Human resource experts say that if you satisfy most of the others in even a mediocre way, recognition is the most important item on this list. Everyone craves recognition. Everyone hates to be the recipient of micromanaging.

Suppliers want you to accept their goods and services with minimal fuss and they want to be paid on time. The smartest thing you can do to keep a supplier that you want to keep is pay them ahead of their terms. I had a client recently that wired payments to my bank account on the very day I sent them an invoice. Talk about spinning the invoice printer! They did this more than once. Do you think I will jump through hoops for them in the future? You bet I will. What did it cost them? Pennies in lost interest on the float.

Now, it is easy for a small business to know their customers, but I'll bet in the smallest of paper mills, the workers in the mill do not know much about the customers, except when there is a

complaint. I believe data good and bad, including payment history and anything else important about the customer, should be disseminated all the way to the lowest person in the organization. When there is good news, the people that make the product should get the all-important recognition. This makes better future products, especially for the complimenting customer. No doubt when the news is bad, everyone hears about it—a culture that provides little incentive to anyone.

Customers want your goods or services, without blemish or excuse, on exactly the day they want them. Even though customers intellectually know you have other customers, they want to feel like they are your only customer. The worst thing you can do in customer relationships is to provide an excuse for failure to meet their expectations that involves serving another customer first. And, of course, they want easy payment terms.

Marketing, advertising and corporate communications work the same way. I talk to many people about these subjects, most of them suppliers who are engineers by training (like me). Many wonder why their marketing program does not work. They want it to be absolutely scientific, sort of like if I put this much stuff in one end of a pipe, I expect that much stuff to come out the other end. This does happen, but only when the numbers get very large (like selling soap, cars and so forth). In smaller numbers it is more like statistics. However, usually the reason they don't understand marketing is that they are not sitting in the recipients' shoes and solving the recipients' problems. Look at automobile advertising. We are pounded with it daily in many forms, yet most of us make a purchase in this area only once every several years. Why the constant advertising? The automobile companies have to make sure that when you are ready to make a purchase, they are top of mind with you. They get the idea of thinking inside the potential customer's head and catering to their needs and wishes. After all, we all really just need 4 wheels, engine, transmission and a safe auto body—everything else is mostly psychological and answers “needs” created by the auto companies themselves.

Same with corporate communications—if you have a stack that has spewed a colored plume for fifty years, one full page ad in the New York Times is not going to improve your image one iota, especially in the community where the stack is located—you have to think like the target recipients. Other blunders are made in this area, too. I was in a mill one time where they had a hot line for the community to call if the locals smelled, saw or heard anything that concerned them. The problem was this phone sat on the environmental manager's desk. Typical call: “I smell something, what is it?” Answer: “Oh, we just had a little burp of sulfuric acid that got mixed with (you make it up).” The scientifically trained environmental manager thought they had just made a calm, rational and soothing response. What the local resident in the community heard was, “We are out of control and one step from complete radioactive meltdown; you had better grab

your children and run for the hills.” Not exactly the impression you want in your local community. It would have been better if the mill had hired a cave man (to borrow from a current popular advertising campaign in the United States), put the phone on his desk, and made the environmental manager explain all excursions to the cave man in terms he could understand. Then, the calls from the local community could have been handled without creating more alarm.

Sitting on the other side of the table may seem hard to apply to safety. However, if the other side of the table is an operating table, it may not seem such a far stretch after all. Be safe and we will talk next week. ##