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Over and Over and Over

By Paperitalo Staff

The curse of all businesses is killing problems and killing them dead. If you have been in the workforce more than a month, you know the drill. Big problem rears up. People are gathered together in an attempt to solve it. It gets about half solved and then another problem appears. The first one is put aside to deal with the next crisis. The first bounces up again in another year, because it was never solved the first time.

Managers in charge of manufacturing processes and machinery have gotten fairly good at killing problems and killing them dead. They use some form of “root cause analysis” (goes by different names, depending on which consulting fad to which you subscribe).

There is an advantage when one is dealing with manufacturing processes and machinery. The stuff can't think for itself, it has no personality, and it can't talk back.

I have always said, given the same level of professional management, it is easier to manage a manufacturing process than it is a building full of consultants. The inanimate components are one thing, but the fact the machinery has a “nameplate” capacity is another great advantage. No matter how upset the supervisors and employees become, the machinery and processes act as a metronome, setting the pace of output in any given unit of time. By the way, a measure of how upset they are is reflected in the safety record of the facility. Upset people have accidents.

A group of people working in an office or service environment is another matter. They have no metronome. Their output is hard to measure. They pout. Some days they have energy.

So, killing their people process problems is much more difficult, for the root cause can change. It can change because people's attitudes change. They change with the weather. They change because someone looked cross eyed at them.

All of this means you have to dig deeper to find the root cause. The best managers that I have seen at this take all the time necessary to talk and root out the problem at its deepest levels. Time and lots and lots of questions. Deep problems may take days or weeks or months. Not all the time in every day, but a number of sessions, formal and informal.

The failure to kill such problems usually occurs simply because we do not take the time to fully explore them. We become bored with them, make incorrect assumptions about others' attitudes and perceptions, and, in our haste to move on, abandon the exploratory phase too quickly.

What do you think? How do you go about dealing with intractable management problems?

For safety this week, just read again what I said above. Safety problems have a genesis in upset people.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##