



Tech Solutions Must Involve People, Too

If the employees don't buy it, it won't work

BY DOUG CATER

So you've tried all the latest technical solutions to your manufacturing problems — Demand Flow, Lean Manufacturing, Total Quality Management, Six Sigma — but you can't seem to get improvements to stick. You're not alone. These tools will provide impressive gains under the right circumstances, but without a keen eye toward their impact on the workforce and the behaviour of your workforce toward the changes, gains will rarely be sustained and the bottom line will not improve.

We've all heard it many times before: "Your employees are your most valuable asset."

But they're also your most unpredictable asset, your most frustrating asset and most often the reason for success or failure of a business. Hence the plethora of books dedicated to managing change and changing behaviour. The challenge most organizations face, however, is how to integrate the teachings of the technical gurus with the babbling of the behaviourists. So let's examine how successful

change agents view the process of change.

Whether you're attempting to change a person's or a group's behaviour, or introducing new tools and techniques inside your organization, there are only five relatively simple concepts to remember, despite what the behaviourists and consultants may say!

1. Expectations

Here, I am blending the technical side with the behaviour side. Sir Isaac Newton described the law of inertia (derived from a Latin word meaning "idleness"): any body is reluctant to move from a position of rest; and any body in motion with uniform velocity will resist change to that motion.

Sound like any bodies you know?

The first step to changing behaviour in the short term and sustaining it over the long term, is setting new, clear

and consistent expectations. Put in even more simple terms, we need to ask our people to do what we want them to do. This may be reinstating what we've always expected, or it may be asking them to act in some bizarre new way that makes absolutely no sense to them based on all the training and experience they've had in the workplace . . . something like Lean Manufacturing for example! Regardless, there will be reluctance to make that change — expect it.

Remember, when employees are accustomed to doing very little, and this goes without response from management for some time, the message being sent is that this behaviour is acceptable. Changing the expectation is the only way to correct it.

2. Tools and Training

Remember when you learned to play baseball, hockey, or basketball? You weren't sent out onto the playing field without basic instructions or the right equipment. Learning a new practice at work is no different. We need the right tools and the right training if we are expected to be successful. Simply demanding that employees implement some new type of manufacturing strategy without ensuring they understand the wherefores and the whys, and without providing the necessary equipment and tooling, will only lead to frustration on both sides.

Manufacturing at its best is a group of well trained employees, with appropriate tools, operating well maintained equipment and following a set of proven procedures and processes that will yield the desired results.

3. Unlearning the Old

Once again to that Newton guy. Most of your employees are well trained, using appropriate equipment. Think of it from their perspective: why should they change? Most of us operate within a certain range, day to day — we call it our "comfort zone." Just as the name suggests, we are comfortable doing what we have always done, and the better we are at it, the more reluctant we will be to change.

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Most employees will try to change when asked to do so, but they also quickly revert to the old methods and tools when the opportunity arises. It is critical that we do everything we can as managers and supervisors to prevent this. This means retraining, providing new tools that support the new behaviour, and above all, removal of the old tools. We can go a long way to ensuring implementation of new concepts if we remove all the old tools (crutches) our employees once used to do their work.

And don't forget: when you implement change, there will be a learning curve! If our people make mistakes, that's part of learning. Chastising or reprimanding someone who is trying new methods is a guaranteed way to ensure they don't try anything new again!

4. Follow up and Reinforce

Reinforce appropriate behaviour and address inappropriate behaviour. If you do this well you can almost forget about the other four concepts. Sounds simple, but I have met very few managers or supervisors who do this well.

This is all about committing time and

energy to your employees. If you don't spend time with them, you don't know when they are meeting expectations. If you don't spend time with them, you won't know when they are out of line or slacking off. If you don't spend time and energy with them you cannot hold them accountable!

Taken to the next level, what do you do when they are slacking off? What do you do when they exceed expectations? We learn very quickly as adults. If I slack off repeatedly, and there are no negative consequences, I will likely continue that behaviour until I am asked to correct it. Even then, I may challenge my supervisor if I sense the commitment is not there to enforce the new expectations.

We also need to consistently assess the excuses provided for why something wasn't done, or was done poorly. Legitimate excuses will provide opportunities for learning and improvement on both sides. Illegitimate excuses must be addressed head on, and in a timely fashion, to further reinforce the new or changed expectation.

5. Remember our Nature

Remember that we all have families outside work. Our sons and daughters get sick, they get into trouble and they get married. Our spouses work and come home tired and cranky. We have health problems, money problems and pet problems. All these things affect our performance and our attitudes at work. We are only human. If you think we are unpredictable, think again. You simply may be missing a large piece of information that would help you to conclude that a person is actually being quite rational.

So if you if you want to be a real change agent, and make dramatic improvements that can be sustained and will drop to the bottom line, stick to the basics. It doesn't matter if you operate inside the organization or as an external support person — people respond to clearly communicated, reasonable expectations. E

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